

Durga's Hand

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Summary: Devishi Chaudhuri was just trying to get through her sophomore year of college when she becomes entangled in a nation-wide hunt for the Prophet of the Lord. Able to see through other people in her dreams, she is manipulated by forces she doesn't understand, and must navigate the powers of Hell, Heaven, and in-between to find her way home.

## 1. Prologue

**\*\*Prologue: Time to Make the Donuts\*\***

"\_\*\*Do NOT plug in brewer until step #5."\*\*\_ \_\*\*- Bunn BTX-B Use and Care Manual\*\*\_-

Devishi Chaudhuri yawned as she slid the key to the cafe into the industrial lock, glancing at her reflection in the plate glass window. At five in the morning, the streets of Norfolk were relatively empty, the mist from the near-by Lafayette River hanging heavy in the early chill. She stepped inside, keying in the code for the alarm and taking care to lock the door behind her. There was nothing worse than people stumbling in thirty minutes before opening, then taking offense when she couldn't sell to them before counting in the register. After clocking in, she started sliding the appropriate hoppers into the grinder, filling brew baskets for the air-pots: house blend, single origin, dark roast, decaf. The flavor of the month was brewed on another, smaller coffee-maker, to ensure its taste and scent didn't taint the main machine. While the first pots were brewing, she slid her phone out of her pocket, opening her music app and switching on her AC/DC playlist; sometimes she needed the boost in the morning, and with no-one else in the cafe yet, she didn't have to edit her preferences for anyone.

Devi knew she certainly could use the push today. She hadn't slept well the night before. A dream about a man in a black coat clung to her mind. Nothing overtly sinister had happened â€“ the coated man

had just had a seemingly cordial conversation with a teen-aged girl in a hoodie outside a boarded-up shop. Yet something about the tone of the talk had been unsettling, disconcerting. To top it off, the older man's eyes had been completely obscured by red during the dream. The girl he was talking to didn't seem too perturbed by this, but had simply answered the questions put to her and handed the man a slip of paper. The dream had been abruptly cut short by Devi's alarm clock, but stuck in her head for some reason.

Heading back to the safe, she pulled out the closing slip from the previous day, along with the drawer keys. Sliding the next set of air-pots under the brewer, she opened the main drawer and began to count out the separate denominations of cash and change, comparing it to the yesterday's closing tallies. Few of her fellow baristas were fans of math early in the morning, but she found the rows of even numbers strangely calming — they had only one right answer. She heard the back door open, and although she knew it was almost certainly another employee coming in, her hand still brushed the pocket knife in her apron. A large man in overalls, beaming all over his broad, honest face came around the corner — Chuck from the roastery downstairs. Chuck was an old-fashioned Southern gentleman, a salt-of-the-earth type who was ready to be friends with anyone he met. He had been a cop "in a previous life," but had left the force after becoming disgusted with the political intrigue. He now hauled bags of coffee on and off delivery trucks, stocking the roastery with the green beans and bringing ready roasted product to various retailers in the neighborhood.

"How you doin' this mornin', sweetie?" he grinned at her, helping himself to the fresh air-pot. Devi smiled to herself as she wrote down the total from the drawer; Chuck rarely referred to anyone by their given name.

"Getting by, Chuck. How you doing?" she replied, falling easily into his mode of speaking. The older man started to tell her about the latest deliveries, mentioning an incoming shipment had included a new single origin bean that smelled promising. Devi promised to come down later that day to take a whiff.

Her 5:30 came in, a lean young man with curly blond hair. Everett had worked for this cafe in one capacity or another almost since its inception, largely off the books at the start due to his being underage. Devi often forgot that he was only 19, same as her, as he seemed mature beyond his years. Devi appreciated how knowledgeable he was about the industry, his dedication to his work, and the fact that he would get hacked off at customers for the same reasons she did. During many hard shifts, he had saved her sanity by joining her in the kitchen for a good rant on the trials of service industries. He greeted her with a quick "Morning!" before heading right to his beloved espresso machines and beginning to rinse the portafilters, check the flow of the steamwands, and adjust the grind.

At ten 'til, he turned to her, "I'll get the lights and start flipping chairs, if you want to finish up here." By now, Devi had finished counting the second drawer, set out sanitizer buckets, and turned on the bagel toaster.

"Sure, I just need to get the ice bin," she replied, turning off the music on her phone while putting on a headset for the drive-through. Wheeling the bin to the front door, she opened the valve to drain the

melt-water. Glancing up the sidewalk, she noticed the mount for the flagpole on the outer wall — the owner always insisting on bringing the flag inside at closing, carefully rolled around its pole. Might as well put it up, while I'm at the door, Devi thought. Leaving the door propped open on the ice bin, she walked to the wall-mount, unrolling the flag and standing on her tip-toes to slide the pole into place. She wasn't worried when the van pulled into the parking spot behind her; lots of the regulars showed up right at opening, waiting in their cars for the doors to be unlocked. Nor was she concerned when a couple of businessmen stepped out, as the cafe had its share of professionals. And when Everett came outside to see what was keeping her, all he found was the drive-through headset on the sidewalk and no sign of his friend.

## 2. Chapter 1: The Devil You Know

\*\*Chapter 1: The Devil You Know\*\*

"\_\*One may smile and smile, and be a villain\* - Hamlet\*\_\*

Crowley lounged behind his desk, examining reports from his field agents on their woeful attempts to track down his wayward prophet. He worked his jaw, exhaling his frustration. A hulking man with a shaved head and a slightly rumpled suit came in, a pained expression on his face.

"What is it, Waverly?" Crowley asked without looking up, his tone short.

"We got the coffee-shop girl, sir. They're bringing her now."

Crowley leaned back in his chair, regarding his flunky for the first time, "You seem a bit perturbed, Waverly. Was picking up a co-ed such a trial for you?"

"She's crazy, sir!" Waverly protested, "We went to do a simple grab, and she pulled a knife on us! We got that off her and she started kicking, punching, scratching — the little bitch laid Williams' face open with just her nails. And she bit me, sir!" He held up his hand, showing a series of dark pink marks in front his right thumb. Crowley let out a bark of laughter, his eyes glittering in amusement.

"Well, you'd best show the unholy terror in," he concluded.

Two more demons walked in, shepherding the petite girl between them with a mixture of distaste and resigned weariness; one of them did indeed have a series of red parallel lines on his cheek. She was dressed simply in khakis, black Converse, and a black fleece pullover, the name of the cafe embroidered on it — the standard barista "uniform." Her black hair was parted on the side and pulled back in thick plait. There was a bruise blooming on her right cheek and her face was paled to an unhealthy sallow, but her eyes were hard as the demons shoved her into a chair.

"Ms. Chaudhuri," Crowley began, "It seems you reacted rather badly to my invitation, gave my lads a bit of trouble." The girl watched him with a singularly suspicious expression, saying nothing. "I

appreciate your coming here was, perhaps, not under the best of circumstances," the demon continued, "but I think we can get past that, to find an arrangement that is mutually beneficial for the both of us." He leaned back in his office chair, getting into his stride, "I'm in the midst of attempting to regain the assistance of a former associate, to welcome him back into the fold, if you will. Normally, I'd make some overture, send a fruit basket, that sort of thing, but that requires a mailing address and unfortunately, my associate has been incommunicado since our, ah, falling out. Which, by the way, was due to a regrettable, but quite innocent misunderstanding."

His tone was businesslike and precise, albeit with a practiced carelessness that he'd found disarming to "clients". His face was a habitual facade of confidence and charm: the picture of a reasonable man. Devishi watched him in silence, her expression guarded but distant, as though she was trying to remember something. Crowley pressed on, "The by-no-means insignificant resources at my disposal for locating this individual have, thus far, come up dry, so I'm trying a different tack, being no stranger myself to the less common ways of acquiring information." Here his eyes gleamed as he studied her with what he intended to look like fondness, but which came off as pure greed: "I've sent for a specialist, though I'm—"

"I know who you are, what you are." Crowley narrowed his eyes at the interruption, scrutinizing the girl in front of him. She looked almost as shocked at having spoken as the demons surrounding her were. She initially seemed to shrink back in the chair, ducking her head slightly, but then her jaw tightened and she met his eyes again. Demon. She didn't know how she knew this, or even that it was possible, but she was certain down to the very marrow of her bones, as sure as she was there were stars in the sky.

"Well," he continued, voice low, "I suppose that makes things simpler." He rose, slowly circling to the front of the desk before leaning back against it casually, hands in the pockets of his slacks. His expression was inscrutable, save that it oozed self-assurance; his slight smirk was the epitome of "I know something you don't know." If Devi wasn't terrified, she probably would have found it vaguely annoying. "I have need of someone with certain... skills," he continued, "and I'm willing to make it worth your while." Confusion clouded her expression; the guy couldn't be that hard up for a cappuccino. "It's become pressing that I find this person and I believe you can do that for me," Crowley finished with a shrug.

"Me?" Devi squeaked.

Crowley looked surprised, then laughed, "Of course, dear girl, that's why you're here. You know who I am, but you think I don't know about you?"

Devi's eyes went wide, and she began to sputter, desperately trying for a coherent sentence, "I'm not... I can't... I don't know what you mean. I'm just a barista. I'm, I'm nobody." Crowley's smirk widened, causing Devi's stomach to twist unpleasantly, and he leaned forward slightly. It was unnerving how effortlessly he could convey intimidation merely through posture. The man clearly understood presence, and how to use it.

"Nobody?" he asked softly, "So, you've never seen something you

couldn't have seen?" Devi's mind leapt to all the times she'd known just where her father was on his way home, or when her brothers were done with soccer practice, or when her cousins were coming by after school; to the times she'd had strangely vivid dreams of places she'd never been and people she'd never met; to that nightmare where she'd felt herself drown with Nina at the pool.

"You see, pet, some people carry tendencies toward unusual capability; it's in their blood. You are the latest in a long line of women who could see things from another perspective, namely, someone else's," Crowley looked at her from under raised eyebrows, "You're a seer."

Devi's mind blanked, except for an utterly unhelpful recollection of Hagrid proclaiming, "Yer a wizard, Harry," from the first Harry Potter book. Denial was the first back on its feet, disputing madly: it wasn't possible, it wasn't logical, it made no sense. Slowly, however, and completely without her consent, other pieces started fitting into place. She remembered when those deaths happened at her high school swimming pool, the two men who came to "fix the filter" and ended up painting weird symbols under every skimmer basket; how she had somehow known about the arsenal in their trunk, the scaly thing they had carried out wrapped in a tarp, and that she must under no circumstances go for her usual swim that Tuesday night. She looked back up at the man in the suit, who was watching her impassively, waiting out her confusion.

"You think that's me, that I can find someone that you can't?" Devi asked, incredulous. Oh, he had to be nuts. Even if he was right about her "seeing things" being some mystic gift, she had never sought out these visions or tried to focus them on a particular person!

"I think you can," he replied smoothly, "and you will." There was no change in his tone, but the unspoken threat hung heavy in the air.

"I can't!" Devi felt panic rising in her throat, "You don't understand, I really can't! I don't know if I have this gift or skill or whatever, but I can't just find someone. I don't know how!" Crowley arched an eyebrow at her outburst, seeming amused.

"Never done this sort of thing before, heh?" he ventured, "Ever tried?" Devi numbly shook her head. He pursed his lips, "There are some measures that can be taken." Devi cocked her head, regarding him skeptically; that can't be good. "What?" he challenged, "You're in uni and you've never heard of uppers?"

"There are 'uppers' for psychic powers?" Devi scoffed. Crowley chuckled, which was the polar opposite of comforting.

"You'd be surprised what the right words and a few esoteric odds and ends can get you," he gloated, "After all, it's how we found you."

Scowling, Devi snapped back, "If your little magic tricks are as good as all that, what do you need me for?"

Crowley sighed, looking pained, "There are, regrettably, limitations to this sort of thing, ways the spells can be made ineffectual. My associate seems to be making things difficult."

"Maybe you should take the hint," she suggested waspishly. She was confused and scared, which always made her angry. Crowley set his mouth in a thin line, irritation mounting.

"You may wish consider your position more carefully," he said, sliding a cell phone out of his pocket. Her cell phone. How did he have her phone? He thumbed past the lock screen and opened her calendar app. "Your younger brothers' soccer practice ends soon," Crowley stated, as though changing the subject, "It would be a shame if they weren't there when your mother arrives to pick them up." Devi's fists clenched and she leaned forward in her chair, only to have one of the demons behind lay a heavy hand on her shoulder. Crowley slid the phone back into his pocket, pasted a slick smile on his face, and spread his arms, "There's no need for any nastiness here. My intentions towards you are strictly professional" locating an associate whose specialty I find myself again in need of." He peered at her, "Then there's the matter of scientific interest. Surely, you're at least a bit curious about this little quirk of yours?"

There was the rub. As skeptical as she was about this alleged gift, she was also itching to find out more. She looked up at the suited man with narrowed eyes. He had "acquired" her with little trouble, and he was clearly capable of harming her family. She thought back to all the stories she'd read about demons. In Hinduism, they were typically represented as agents of chaos: Rakshasas were flesh-eaters, driven by bloodlust, that preyed on humans, but power-hungry Asuras could sometimes be reasoned with. Neither were quite analogues for the Christian notion of demons. Some tales out of the Arabian Nights had sorcerers and heroes who made use of powerful Djinn " weren't they something like demons? Crowley cleared his throat, shifting impatiently. Devi let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"You said this sort of things run in my family?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes," Crowley replied, "your maternal line."

"Then, does my mom have it, too?" Devi asked with a frown. It seemed unlikely that her mother would have failed to mention something like that.

"No," Crowley said slowly, "there are other requirements. For instance, a seer must be a female, and the first child of both parents."

"But that can't be right," she objected. Crowley cocked an eyebrow in challenge. Devi shook her head, "My grandmother is the eldest of her siblings."

Crowley smirked, "And?"

Devi snorted, "I don't know what the 'rules' for this thing are, but Grandmother's the last person to see things from another perspective."

Crowley shrugged, "Maybe. Doesn't really matter. You are a seer. I need a seer. So, the only question is," he leaned forward again, "do

I have your cooperation?"

Devi swallowed hard, frowning at the floor as if hoping to find her answer there. She didn't really have a choice, but Crowley was content to let her reach that conclusion herself; it would be more effective that way. Finally, she looked up, "What do I have to do?"

### 3. Chapter 2: First Dose

\*\*Chapter 2: First Dose\*\*

"Every form of addiction is bad, no matter whether the narcotic be alcohol, morphine, or idealism"

><strong>- C.G. Jung</strong>

"You're sure about this?" Devi asked. Nearly a week had passed, during which Crowley had thumbed through numerous dusty tomes, sent out minions for ingredients, and quizzed her extensively about any previous visions. Devi found that the more she talked about them, the more she remembered. Each time, she'd been looking through someone she knew well, seeing and hearing as they did. There was even a slight bleeding of emotions from the observer. Everything she had seen had been happening in the moment, but she was more likely to have visions while she slept, something about being more "open to the subconscious," as Crowley had said. He'd had her attempt scrying as well, staring into a silver bowl of water or a quartz globe until her eyes crossed and her head ached. This had proved fruitless, but led to a serendipitous discovery as she'd glanced into the fireplace for a moment to rest her eyes and became mesmerized by the flames. The shifting, dancing shades had slowly coalesced into the shape of her father, speaking to a police officer. Crowley called it a promising start, but said she needed to cast her gaze further afield.

"If your family is such a distraction," he'd chided, "I could bring them here, if that would ease your mind."

Devi took the threat to heart, devouring the reams of information she'd been given on Kevin Tran, Prophet of the Lord. "Prophet," she'd asked days earlier, "does that mean he's like me?"

"Not quite," Crowley replied with a chortle, "Much rarer for one." He'd been evasive, but had at last explained that a Prophet was able to decipher certain texts that contained secrets about particular creatures, specifically any weaknesses they may have. She examined a snapshot of him for the hundredth time, noting the close-cropped black hair, dark eyes, and the subtle signs of worry in his expression: tightness around the mouth, the wrinkle in the brow. Of course, if the picture had been taken while Kevin was in Crowley's keeping, that was all perfectly understandable; Devi would bet she wore a similar look now. She rubbed a hand across her eyes, scanning the dossier.

He was a smart kid, brilliant, in fact, though his high school schedule looked just next door to impossible. It was like he'd mapped out his entire life in fifteen-minute blocks — she was surprised he hadn't included bathroom breaks on his daily planner. He'd aimed at going to Princeton, she saw, would have likely got in too, even without a glowing recommendation from Dick Roman. Wonder how he

managed that, Devi mused. Of course, that was before the otherworldly had hit his life like a semi. He'd run off into the blue, talking of divine callings, vanished for a while, presumably kidnapped, and had reappeared briefly in one of Surcocorp's development centers, which was then destroyed by an undetected gas leak gone critical.

Kevin was still listed as a missing person on several national databases, but nothing solid had surfaced in nearly a year. Even with his extensive network of spies and informants, Crowley had only a handful of unconnected sightings. He'd kept a watch on the prophet's mother and girlfriend, but Kevin had yet to make contact with either of them.

Devi turned back to watch the demon across the table, who was currently adding a measured pinch of a dirty white grist to a stone bowl. Bunches of various dried plant parts, piles of powder, and a number of claws, teeth, and bones were laid out on a sheet of leather in front of him.

"Perfectly," he said in answer to her earlier question, not bothering to look up, "this formula has been used by psychics for ages; it'll sharpen that sight of yours right up." He treated her to a smile that he probably intended to be reassuring; it wasn't.

For one, psychics weren't quite the same as seers â€“ Devi had read earlier that week that psychics were generally able to read traces of past events left on places, people, or objects, whereas seers saw things that were happening elsewhere, but in the present. Selecting a sprig of dried foliage that smelled strongly of pitch, Crowley rolled the small leaves between his large fingers to crush them, scattering them in the bowl.

"But what about directing it?" Devi objected, "I've still never been able to find any specific person if I don't know them."

"That's what this is for," he replied, holding up a tuft of clipped black hair, "just a touch of the man we're after." He struck a match and set it to the lock of hair, letting the ash crumble into the bowl, before dropping in the last smoldering strands. A reddish pool of flame oozed across the surface, and Devi wrinkled her nose at the smell. The substance, which had been a dull dark green, took on an oily sheen, black streaks smudging the surface. Devi watched dubiously as Crowley selected a distressingly large syringe from a tray of tools, and drew a quantity of the potion into the chamber. It looked like at least thirty milliliters. Devi felt herself sinking into her seat, wishing dearly to disappear.

Crowley straightened and looked at her, eyes crinkling at the corners with delight, "Are you sitting comfortably?" He looked like a cross between a mad scientist and child with a new toy, and Devi fought the urge to get out of the chair and start backing away towards the door.

"Sure," she answered shortly, "Fire away." Crowley set a thick stub of a candle on the table in front of her, lit it with a snap of his fingers, and set the picture of Kevin against it.

"Coat," he said, and Devi sighed as she shrugged out of her fleece. She wasn't quite sure where the warehouse she was being kept in was,

but every room in the place seemed a hair too cold; she couldn't recall the last time both her hands and feet had felt warm enough at the same time. Taking her left wrist in hand, he stretched out her arm so that the inside faced him and began probing for a vein. Devi watched him with rising apprehension, but she doubted she could pull out of his grip. She winced as the needle entered her skin, and choked back a gasp as the plunger descended, pushing the mixture into her arm. A lacework of green spread out from the injection site, following the blood vessels, and almost immediately a burning sensation followed. It reminded her of when she'd run into a fire-ant mound while playing soccer.

"Is it supposed to do that?" she gritted through clenched teeth, but Crowley wasn't paying attention. Instead, he watched the lines of green moving down her arm with a morbid sort of fascination, before turning to study her face, focusing on her eyes.

"Now," he said, laser-like attention unwavering, "look at the flame." Devi shifted her gaze to the candle and found her vision already clouding towards the edges.

"I think..." she began, and that was the last she remembered.

#### 4. Chapter 3: Recovery

##### \*\*Chapter 3: Recovery\*\*

"\_\*\*You can check out any time you like, \*\*\_\_\*\*but you can never leave..." - Hotel California, The Eagles\*\*\_

Devi's senses drifted back to her slowly, one at a time. First, she was aware of a faint but pervasive scent of sulfur that seemed to stick to the back of her throat, along with something like burnt feathers. A sour taste in her mouth and a buzzing in her ears were the next to fall into place. She shifted, feeling a firm, but yielding surface underneath her and stiffness in her limbs, cramped from being in the same position. Her eyelids felt like sandbags, and she seriously considered staying unconscious to save herself the effort of opening them, but a voice, muffled, distant, yet slowly becoming clearer, pulled her back to waking.

"...look so sweet and innocent when they're asleep, don't they?" The low gravel of the voice seemed familiar, but Devi couldn't place it. "Come on, pet, open your eyes." Devi grudgingly obeyed and found herself staring into cold hazel eyes, squinted slightly in contemplation. Oh, right.

Devi attempted to sit up with a moan before slumping back bonelessly. Her skin was clammy, and she felt as shaky and weak as when she had gotten the flu the previous semester. Looking up, she glanced around the room. She was in a hospital bed in a bare, industrial sort of room. Nearby was an adjustable lamp, like those used for medical examinations, along with a crash cart and few dusty monitors that seemed to be tracking her vitals. She looked down, noting electrodes on her chest and arms, and an IV running up to a drip stand on her left. There was another man, or demon, she supposed, minding the monitors with the an air of exasperated desperation. Devi hazarded a guess that life support was not usually a concern for Crowley's organization. He was a twitchy, greasy, weasel-y type, and she

glowered at him when he tried to adjust one of the electrodes; he backed off, preoccupying himself with checking the gauge on the IV instead.

Crowley cleared his throat, drawing her attention sharply back to where he was leaning against the crash cart. His gaze was intent enough to make her hair stand on end — "hunger" was the best word for what she saw there.

"What did you see?" His question catapulted her mind back to where it had been before waking, and the images hit all at once, like a flood. She groaned, leaning forward to rest her head in her hands as she tried to pick apart the tangled skein. "What did you see?" Crowley's tone was terse, his meager patience dwindling. Devi tried to focus, chasing the most vivid strand of thought.

"Colored glass, green and red, like... like a stained-glass window," she said at last. Once she started, it was easy enough to follow the thread. "The paint on the frame is old and peeling, looks like it hasn't been redone in years." She took a deep breath and continued, "A big room with rows of... benches, I guess... but the rows aren't in order. There's a cross on the wall, one of the ones with the body on it."

"A church," Crowley finished for her, "He's hiding in a church." He mulled over this for a moment before turning back to her, "What else?"

Devi sorted through the remaining images, "There are a couple rooms off the main one, behind... the podium or whatever it's called..."

"Not about the church," Crowley snapped, "What else about the location? D'you get a place name, a street-sign, something we can act on?" Devi frowned, mentally sifting through the images again, trying to find something significant that she might have missed. Coming up empty, she looked up at Crowley with a frightened, blank expression. "No," Crowley narrowed his eyes and tightened his jaw, "an abandoned church, that could be anywhere in North America - that's all?"

"Wait," Devi interrupted, "there were trees outside, I could see them through the higher windows."

"Right. Narrows it right down," Crowley snorted irritably.

"The leaves on them were still green — they haven't started to turn yet," Devi pressed.

"Late September, that's still not much of a lead," he cocked his head at her, "bit disappointing for five hours' work."

Devi was sure she'd misheard, "Five hours! I was out for five hours?"

"Just about," Crowley said carelessly, looking at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Why'd you move me here?" Devi peered around her again.

"You squirmed quite a bit when the drug first took effect, wriggled right out of the chair" Crowley shrugged, then grinned slyly, "We may need to consider tying you down next time â€“ wouldn't want you to knock that precious noggin of yours on something, now would we?" Devi scowled at him; that was definitely not happening. "Though, as I said, you didn't give us much..." Crowley continued before trailing off. Seeing her crestfallen expression, he chuckled, tucking a finger under her chin to raise her eyes to his. "Chin up, darling, I'm sure you'll do better next time. After all," he smirked, his voice going softer, "you're highly motivated."

Devi swallowed, remembering the stakes; her family's safety hinged on her ability to meet the demands of this creature, a stranger to mercy. "Next time?" she asked hesitantly.

"'Course! There's still another two doses of the solution," Crowley replied, "unless we up the draught."

"Increase it?" Devi contested, "What you just gave me this time was enough for a five hour trip!"

"And despite all that time gallivanting about on the astral plane, you found no real information," he snarled, his sudden rise in volume enough to make her jump. Devi bit the inside of her cheek, looking down. "Still," he regained his composure smoothly, "not bad for a first go. An acceptable test-run, shall we say." He turned to the other demon, "Rest and fluids â€“ bring her to me in three hours." The underling hustled over to increase her saline drip. Crowley glanced back to the dejected girl on the bed, tossing a "See you soon, pet," over his shoulder before closing the metal door behind him with a clang.

## 5. Chapter 4: If at first

\*\*Chapter 4: "If at first you don't succeed..."\*\*

"\_\*\*Insanity is doing the same thing over and over, and expecting different results"\*\*

><strong>\_\_\*\*- Albert Einstein, attributed\*\*\_

Devishi knew there was little hope of her actually being able to go back to sleep; the best she could manage was a fitful doze. After two hours, she gave up trying. She was ravenously thirsty. The demon watching over her had refilled the pitcher by her bed at least four times, becoming more irritated with each trip. Devi noted a small, dingy bathroom connecting to her recovery room, and took the opportunity to wash herself as well as she could in the tiny sink. As she filled the basin, she was reminded of watching her friend, Meriam, make ablutions before the noon prayer, washing her hands, arms, feet, and face. Devi finished by dabbing over the rest of her skin with a damp lap sponge she had lifted from the medical cart. Undoing her disintegrating braid, she combed her fingers through her hair before re-plaiting it. She didn't like to think about how she smelled at the moment; the potion Crowley had given her seemed to have exuded a residue from her skin, leaving behind a sour, musty scent. She had just resigned herself to putting her grungy clothes back on over her now-clean body when a sharp pounding in the bathroom door nearly caused her to jump out of her skin.

"What?" she snapped at the demon outside, holding the door mostly shut and glaring around it. He wordlessly handed her a set of black scrubs with an expression of distaste " seems her odor had been noticed, but she was glad of any alternative to the same pants and shirt she'd been wearing for days. It wasn't until she'd slipped into the stiff cotton clothing that she realized she had no idea what happened to her shoes. They were missing when she'd awoken. Her "minder" ignored her when she asked, simply taking her upper arm and hustling her out into the hallway, down to Crowley's "office."

The room Crowley had her working in was completely at odds with the rest of the building; if she didn't know better, she would have thought it was a different place altogether. There was a large desk of dark wood with a plush, leather-covered office chair. Behind this was a series of in-wall bookshelves loaded with thick tomes with titles like "Contract Law in Crisis," "Law and Mind: the Psychology of Legal Practice," and "Olden Daze: Hallucinogens Through the Ages." In front of the desk were two smaller, substantially less comfortable chairs, beyond which was a seating area, including a low mahogany coffee table and a leather couch and armchair, complete with an ottoman, arranged around a small granite fireplace. The oddest thing was the large window on the far side of the room, which had letters advertising a Chinese take-out, complete with a number for call-ahead and pick-up. Crowley was comfortably ensconced in the armchair, his usual tumbler of scotch in hand. There was a china tea service on the coffee table, a wisp of steam issuing from the pot's spout. As Devi entered the room, Crowley waved off her escort before gesturing magnanimously to the couch.

"Help yourself," he offered as Devi took a seat; her stomach sank slightly at the sight of a glass flask with the remainder of the green mixture sitting next to the tea tray. She perched on the edge of the couch, tense and guarded, uncertain of what this new tack on Crowley's part signified. He again nodded at the tea service and Devi, deciding it was best not to antagonize the demon, poured a cup of the piping brew, holding it to her lips and blowing gently across the surface. The steam wafted across her face, causing her to relax her shoulders ever so slightly. It looked and smelled like ordinary black tea, strongly steeped and redolent of Assam. She took a cautious sip, then a larger one, and sighed deeply at the soothing sensation of warmth traveling down her throat and into her belly.

Crowley studied her with amusement, "Easy, pet, it's a cuppa, not a religious experience."

"Says the Englishman," Devi rolled her eyes at him as she added milk to her cup, "How many wars did your people start over tea, again?"

"No more than we could win," Crowley countered smugly.

Devi scowled at him, then sat up straighter as a realization hit her, "Wait a minute, was that... did demons push that through the whole colonization bit?"

Crowley chuckled, "As if humanity needed any pushing. No, darling, we just ensured that our interests profited."

Devi looked confused, "Profited how? Were demons in the India

Companies, or something?"

"Demons were everywhere, sweetheart. We always are," Crowley replied, his mouth twisting in a sly smirk, "What is it that you think we do?"

Devi frowned, not sure what he meant. "Stir up chaos, start wars, that sort of thing," she ventured hesitantly.

Crowley's smirk widened, "That's just a bit of fun; Hell is a much bigger enterprise than who's shooting who. Our business is souls."

Devi was mystified, "Souls? What do you mean?"

Crowley settled back into his chair, resting his elbows on the arms and steepling his fingers, looking down at Devi with an odd mix of indulgence and condescension. "Souls are what keep the home fires burning, if you will. Hell runs on souls. I, and my subjects, see to it that there's always plenty of grist for the mill."

"Okay," Devi said slowly, still not quite understanding, "How do you do that?"

Crowley grinned, "Give the people what they want." Noting her look of incomprehension, he continued, "We can do a great deal for those who find themselves missing out, in a tight spot, or at a dead end. We fix their problems, give them ten years of the life they've always dreamed of. Then, when they die, their souls come to us."

"For how long?" Devi interjected.

Crowley looked slightly peeved at the interruption, "How long what?"

"How long does Hell get to keep the souls people sell to you?" Devi clarified.

Crowley snorted, "For eternity, of course!"

Devi looked at him askance, "You're kidding." In response to his raised eyebrow, she went on, "You're telling me that you give them ten years, and you get their souls for the rest of time?" Crowley nodded, looking as if he was painstakingly explaining to a child that water was wet. "And people actually buy that? They take the deal?" Devi was scandalized.

Crowley squinted at her, "You're a Hindu, aren't you?"

"Whatever gave it away?" Devi said sarcastically.

Crowley considered her for a moment before saying slowly, "I don't know quite how your lot thinks things are managed, but with Heaven and Hell, it's one time pays for all." Devi quieted at this, mulling it over in her mind.

"However," Crowley said, shifting forward abruptly, "I didn't bring you down here to explain life, the universe, and everything. We have work to do."

Devi stifled a groan as she set down her teacup; she had entertained a wild hope that he'd forgotten.

"Now, now," Crowley tutted at her, "No sense in putting off til tomorrow, blah, blah, blah." He pulled out a black roll of cloth and opened it, revealing a series of syringes of various sizes. He selected one that was significantly smaller than the one he'd used previously, similar to those used for insulin injections. "I thought we might try something a bit different: smaller doses over the course of an hour," he drew a measure of the green liquid into the vial, "rather than of having you take the whole load at once." He looked up at her and grinned, "Who knows -- you might even manage to stay conscious for some of it this time." He held out his hand for her arm, noting a slight tremor as he took it. "Nervous, kitten?" he jibed.

"Just do it," Devi snapped, swallowing hard and setting her jaw. She refused to wince as the needle entered her skin and the lines of green spread; the color wasn't as vivid as before, but the burning sting was the same. Devi breathed deeply as the drug hit her system, already feeling faint. She leaned back against the plush cushions of the sofa, fighting to center her mind, ground herself somehow.

She barely heard Crowley murmuring in her ear, "Now, darling, do try to stay awake." She latched on to his voice, to the pressure of the couch beneath her, to the lingering scent of hot tea, scrambling for anything to keep her tied to the here and now. "That's it," the gravely voiced soothed, "Focus." Devi moaned softly as a rush of colors and sounds burst in her mind, threatening to overwhelm her. She shifted, trying nonsensically to turn away from the barrage of images in her head. "Don't fight it," the voice in her ear urged softly, "Let it in."

She steadied her breathing, forcing it to stay slow and even, waiting for the vision to resolve. Bits and pieces fell into place like raindrops into a pool: a vinyl booth seat; a worn wooden table, smoothed with use and stained with coffee rings; the light clink of dishes and occasional hiss of a steam wand; the smell of espresso and baked goods. For a moment, she worried that she had directed her mind to the wrong place, that she was seeing the cafe where she worked, having lit on one of her colleagues instead of the Prophet. She was convinced otherwise when her view shifted to an unfamiliar laptop being opened before "her" eyes.

The login screen was nondescript, but the first thing that appeared upon start-up was a browser window to the site of a very... specialized dealer of herbs. No stranger to a spice cupboard, Devi recognized only one or two entries among listings for mandragora, holy vervain, and "distillation of milefolium." A lean hand with long fingers entered her view, unfolding a crumpled note labeled "Nine Herbs Charm," followed by a list of ingredients, identified by traditional and scientific names, and the word "Lacnunga" scrawled in the margins. On the other side of the laptop, the hand opened a battered moleskin notebook to a page with "Merseburg" at the top, followed by several stanzas written in some other language. Unless someone had chosen a rather strange subject for their dissertation, Devi assumed she had found her target.

Her "sight" was much more stable this time. She could hear the low hum of surrounding conversations under the sound of rock music being

piped in through head-phones. Kevin was picking through his list, compiling an order through the site. He'd arranged to pay cash through the mail, so there was no paper trail. Devi sharpened her focus as he began to enter a PO box for delivery, but he turned away from the screen to glance around him. Devi felt the prickle of apprehension that ran through him as he searched the faces in the cafe. He looked out the window, scanning the other side of the street. Something had him spooked. He took a long swig of his drink, strong black coffee with at least two shots of espresso added going by the taste; no wonder he was jittery.

Turning back to the computer, he opened a new tab and navigated to a translation site for ancient European languages, entering lines from his notebook in the search bar. Now and then, he'd cross-reference a key word at another, similar site, checking that he'd grasped the full meaning. He worked at this for a while, pausing now and then to scan the cafe again. Devi could feel his restlessness bleeding through, but wasn't sure what was sparking his anxiety. Maybe it was just the natural reaction to having someone like Crowley hounding him. He made a few more stabs at working before snapping shut the laptop irritably.

Packing his things quickly into a canvas satchel, he headed out the door, barely hearing the barista wishing him good day. Kevin headed quickly down the street, ball-cap pulled low on his face, eyes on the ground. As he moved, Devi felt her focus on him waver; it was as though her sight couldn't keep up with him. She strained her mind, trying to hold on to her link to him, but the colors and sounds were running together again, distinctions melting away as the trance faded.

\* \* \*

><p>Crowley glanced at gilded clock on the mantle, fidgeting impatiently. It had been more than forty-five minutes since he'd administered the final injection. Keeping to a quarter-dose every quarter hour seemed to at least minimize the side-effects: the girl had hardly thrashed at all, and had now settled into position curled up against the arm of the couch. Aside from intermittent bouts of shivering, she'd remained relatively still. He scrutinized her face, watching the flickering of her eyelids as she dreamed. There was a faint sheen of sweat on her forehead, and her face was pale, but without the grayish tinge she'd shown in the first attempt.<p>

None of that mattered, however, if she hadn't found Kevin. The prodigal prophet had eluded his extensive spy network, his underworld connections, and the most intensive locating spells Crowley knew of, and he knew most of them. Now, he was stuck waiting on Bollywood Sleeping Beauty to find out if he was even on the right track. He clenched his jaw, working his fingers into the leather creases of the chair arm. The girl shifted in her sleep again, letting out a soft murmur of protest. Crowley sat up straighter, but she settled down again with a sigh, and Crowley slumped back petulantly, resting his head against his fist and flicking his eyes back to the clock. If she didn't come 'round within the hour, he was going start sticking pins.

At least the rest of Hell was running smoothly enough. Since ending Dick, deals had been made at a fair clip, the latent fear from the collapse of the corporate empire nicely fueling people's preexisting

insecurities. The hunting community had largely gone back to stalking monsters, now that the top "experts" in demon-killing had left the stage. That, at least, had been resolved completely to his satisfaction. He smirked at the memory of sweeping out of Sucrocorp's lab with everything he wanted, leaving one bewildered moose in his dust. Two of the three biggest pains in his ass were now out of the picture, the third was likely in the process of drinking himself to death, and their guru... well, good things come to those who wait. The only remaining loose-ends were the Prophet and the tablet, which apparently had some rather dicey info on demonic warfare. Having exhausted all other means of finding the boy, he was now wading into a corner of the esoteric he hadn't been to in centuries, relying on a "sighted" individual hopped up on mother's best Black Mass blend. Speaking of which...

\* \* \*

><p>Devi rolled from her side onto her back, slowly uncurling from her cramped position. She felt like she'd been stuffed into a ball and rolled downhill, several times. She opened her eyes, then shut them immediately against the glare of sunlight, which seemed to ram through the slit of her eyelids like a dull knife, digging into her skull. She sat up slowly, instantly regretting it; leaning forward with a groan, she rested her head on hands and rubbing the heels of her palms into her eyes.</p>

Crowley chuckled, "Rough night, darling?"

Devi groaned again, his voice grating on her raw nerves. "What the hell is in that stuff?" she groused.

Crowley shrugged noncommittally, "Sparrow bones, Salvia divinorum, thorn-apple, a few other bits and bobs; nothing too strenuous."

Devi lifted her head, squinting at him, "Wait, thorn-apple? As in Datura?"

"A member of the family, I believe," Crowley replied smoothly.

"That's poisonous!" Devi objected. Crowley looked supremely unconcerned.

"Only in quantity," he waved her off.

"I'm taking it 'in quantity,'" Devi's fired back, face reddening.

"Relax, darling, I've got it well in hand," he made a soothing gesture, "The amount is carefully modulated, nothing untoward should happen."

Devi scowled at him, "'Untoward' as in I have kidney failure, or 'untoward' as in you don't get what you want?"

Crowley tilted his head, regarding her with heavily-lidded eyes, "Interesting question. Currently, those two concerns overlap." He leaned forward, voice softening, "You'd do well to keep it that way."

Devi let the subject drop — she was learning that whenever his voice went softer, he was more dangerous. "Now, I believe you were about to tell me about our mutual friend," Crowley's smirk was back in place, his eyes gleaming.

Devi related her vision from the beginning, Crowley stopping her here and there to pull out more detailed information. When she finished, he was rubbing at his short beard, looking out the window meditatively. The boy was getting inventive. He'd known Tran was smart, could hardly avoid the fact, but he hadn't expected quite this level of creativity from him. Resurrecting the Merseburg charm wasn't something lightly undertaken.

He turned back to the seer, "The cafe he was in, what can you tell me about it?"

Devi gnawed at her lip, frowning, "It wasn't a chain, I know that much."

"And?" Crowley pressed, standing, "Come on, this is supposed to be your profession."

Devi narrowed her eyes at him, "Third wave coffee-shop, emphasis on fair trade, single origin beans, selling to young to middle-aged professionals and earthy student-types — I'd guess that the owner is in the mid-forties, former hippie, and has traveled a good deal for business, but not pleasure."

"Next, you'll be telling me his shoe size," Crowley snorted, "At any point, Sherlock, did you happen to notice the name of the place, hmm? A logo on the cup, perhaps." Devi paused, somewhat chagrined.

"No, the cups, the sleeves were generic, but the coffee bags — the label had the Buddha on them, and a name... Robbie, I think."

"Brilliant," Crowley dead-panned, "We've got a 'crunchy' cafe with no marketing sense, and a website for people who've decided smoking marijuana isn't adventurous enough." He looked down at her, scowling, "I believe I instructed you to find something useful."

Devi looked down, running the images through her mind again. "The time stamp on his computer — it was 3:48," she offered apologetically, "That at least gives you a time-zone."

Crowley considered this, checking the clock to confirm his conclusion, "Central Time, then." He looked back down at her, "I suppose we might be able to piece something together. In the meantime," he picked up the syringe, "this delivery method seems more productive — we'll try it again, once you get your feet back under you." He snapped his fingers, and Devi's "minder" appeared by the door. "Get the girl something to eat," Crowley instructed, before turning back to her, "We're not done here yet." Devi look at the flask on the coffee table, containing the remainder of the solution, with a growing sense of dread.

## 6. Chapter 5: Third Time's the Charm

\*\*Chapter 5: Third Time's the Charm\*\*

\*\*I hope he found some consolation in walls. I almost think he did.  
- Bleak House \*\*

Devi didn't have high hopes, but the food she was given was fairly good: steaming vegetable soup, crusty rolls with butter, fresh apples and grapes, and another pot of tea. She had expected to have no appetite in the face of anxiety, but she devoured everything as if facing a famine. Granted, she hadn't eaten in... Actually, she didn't know when she'd last had food. The potion Crowley was using had so altered her sense of time, she wasn't even sure what day it was. She didn't expect it would be good for the digestion either, but Crowley was in no mood to wait. He was filling syringes before she'd even emptied the teapot. He paused, considering the vials in hand.

"I wonder..." he mused, trailing off. He snapped his fingers and a young woman in a dark, fitted pantsuit appeared at the door, "See about getting some empty drip bags, and a peripheral with a larger gauge needle, something that can handle higher viscosity." Devi looked at him askance, and he shrugged, "Just a theory, pet, something that might make delivery easier."

"Why not just pickle me in the stuff?" she deadpanned, "All you need is a really big mason jar." Crowley gave a dry laugh, "If I thought it would help. For now," he flourished the vial, and Devi suppressed a groan.

"Would you at least use the other arm?" she groused, "You're going to blow out a vein."

"Don't fret yourself, darling," Crowley reassured, "I'm a professional."

Devi snorted, "Right, and I'm a frigate bird." He gave her a long, measuring look.

"Do I detect a note of trepidation?" he responded evenly.

Devi examined her inner arm, tracing over the needle-pricks, frowning to herself. Finally, she spoke, "My dad's a surgeon â€“ I've been around doctors since I was little..."

"So, not that long then." Crowley interposed, and Devi rolled her eyes at him before beginning again, "I'm studying medicine myself-"

"No, you're not." She blinked at him, indignant. Crowley smirked back at her shamelessly, his irritating sense of omniscience coming to the fore.

"What are you talking about? I'm on a pre-med track," she shot back.

"Are you really?" he taunted, "Or is that just what you tell mummy and daddy?" Devi opened her mouth, ready to defend herself, but Crowley spoke over her. "The career counselor at Old Dom mentioned you'd been asking what it would take to switch your concentration to something a bit... wetter," he finished with a conspiratorial wink.

Devi clenched her jaw, but the truth was she had spoken to a counselor regarding which of her classes could apply to marine biology as well as medicine. "How did you know I talked to her?" she snapped, "How long have you been spying on me?"

"Don't flatter yourself, pet," he countered, "I've had a plant in the career office for years. You'd be surprised what kids will do for a grade these days." He gave her an appraising look, "Or maybe you wouldn't..."

Devi scowled at him, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course not," Crowley scoffed, "You're just a mild-mannered honors student on your way to becoming a doctor, like a good little Asian girl." He regarded her again, grinning at the flush creeping up her cheeks, "Certainly not planning to run off into the blue to be the next Jacques Cousteau." Devi pressed her lips into a thin line; she was not having this conversation, now, with this man.

"Back up," she said, abruptly changing the subject, "What do you mean you have a 'plant' at the career office?"

"One of the counselors is demon in my employ, obviously," Crowley answered with a shrug.

Devi pressed, "How'd you get a demon through counseling certification?"

Crowley thought she was joking, but upon seeing the sincerity on her face, he burst out laughing, "Ah, pet, you really don't understand what's going on here, do you?" Devi looked at him quizzically. "You think this handsome devil actually is me?" he asked, gesturing grandly to himself.

"It's... not?" Devi spoke slowly, as if to humor him.

Crowley shook his head, "Demons are spiritual creatures, darling. We borrow from the physical world, but we're not a part of it."

She narrowed her eyes, putting the pieces together, "So, this body..."

"A moderately successful literary agent out of New York," he finished.

Devi stared at him, shocked, "You didn't make that body? It's someone else's?!"

"Make it?" Crowley queried, "Why make a body when there's so many perfectly good ones laying around?" Devi was liking this conversation less and less.

"And the literary agent â€“ what did you do with him?"

"Oh, he's still in here," Crowley chuckled, "Least, I think he is; he's been quiet for a long time now."

"He's trapped, in his own body, with you?!" she felt ill, "And you did the same thing to the counselor?"

The demon in front of her smiled proudly and spread his arms wide as though he'd just completed a magic trick and was awaiting applause. She went quiet, afraid to ask the question now swimming in her head. If anyone could have a demon put inside them, why was she still herself? Crowley had gone to a great deal of trouble if such a simple solution existed.

"Your 'sight' is attached to your soul, not your body," Crowley's voice cut in, "Possessing you would be pointless."

Devi looked up at him, astonished, "How..."

"You have a very open face, lamb," he said cavalierly, "I can see every thought running through your mind." He grinned, "I'd wager you're a terrible liar."

Devi scowled at him. "I have less practice than some," she shot back.

Crowley smirked indulgently at her insolence. "Well, I think that's enough education for one day," he glance back to the set of syringes, "Shall we?"

Devi knew she'd pressed her luck as it was, and extended her arm, the one without track marks. Crowley slid the tip of the needle under her skin with practiced ease, pumping the serum into her bloodstream. She slumped back on the couch, dizzy but still conscious. "Smaller dose," Crowley answered her unasked question, showing her the empty vial, "I want to hear what you see, as it happens." He fixed his eyes on hers, "Play-by-play coverage this time, darling, which means you will stay awake."

Devi squeezed her eyes shut, feeling the familiar rush of images stampede into her mind. Kevin was moving, walking quickly down the sidewalk of the main street of town. She noted a whitewashed building with a turret and the spire of a redstone clock tower before her target ducked into an alleyway. He navigated the narrow side-streets, doubling back a few times and checking over his shoulder regularly to see if he was being followed. Devi tried to read the street-signs as he hurried past, but saw only generic names like Broadway and 4th Street. Then, as Kevin glanced up and down a larger road before crossing, she saw the green placard reading "Burlington Ave."

"What?" Crowley urged upon hearing her sudden intake of breath, "What are you seeing?" Devi told him about the clock tower, the road-names, and he shifted his cellphone from his pocket, pulling up a search engine and enter the streets.

"There's more," Devi continued, "Washington and then Adams, it looks like..." She gasped and opened her eyes, "Fairfield."

"That's a street?" Crowley asked.

"That's the town," she replied; she'd seen it on a sign for the library.

"Fairfield, Iowa," Crowley finished, examining his search results with satisfaction, "That's where he's hiding out. Now we just need to find that crumbling church of his..." He looked back at Devi, still

struggling to keep her head in spite of the drug. "You did well, pet," he said with a supercilious air. "Now, that wasn't so hard, was it?"

Devi huffed a breath through her nose. Easy for him to say; she felt like someone had run her brain through a blender. Sights and sounds from Kevin's side were still bleeding through, tangling with her own senses and painting everything with a sense of unreality. All she wanted was to sleep.

Crowley noticed her silence, turning to study her coolly. The dark circles under her eyes, hunched shoulders, wan appearance, waxy cast to her skin: she was knackered. He considered his phone again. More specifics would be welcome, but not strictly necessary. On the other hand, the girl's value to him lay in her mind — break that, and he'd be back to square one. Best to stop while he was ahead. He snapped his fingers for his secretary again. She appeared, carrying a large silver basin filled with blood.

"Call for you, sir," she explained. Crowley took the bowl from her and set it on his desk, leaning over the gurgling liquid. He listened for a moment before a gleeful grin spread across his face. "Is he really?," he replied, "Isn't that delicious?" The new development complicated matters, but it was such rare gift to recover a lost toy. "Follow them," he ordered, "We have our own leads here. Stay in contact."

"Sir?" Devi asked softly.

He ended the call, leaning back to speak to his aide, "We have a general location — I want two of our better fighters on the ground, but they will wait for me before making a move. I'll be coming myself to collect our wayward oracle..."

"\_Sir\_?" Her voice cut across his pronouncements and he turned to consider the girl on the couch. Her tone was deferential, her eyes downcast. "If the Prophet's there, if you find him..." she raised her eyes to meet his, "Can I go home?" Crowley's mouth quirked at the corner. Her big brown doe eyes entreated him, timid, hopeful, with just a touch of pleading; it was adorable.

He gave her a benign smile, "I'll take it into consideration, pet." He turned back to his secretary, missing the look of wary determination that crept over Devi's face.

Crowley instructed the woman to take the seer to a room where she could rest, and Devi followed her out in a daze. The room Devi had been given was a small chamber that might have once been the foreman's office when the factory was functional. There was a steel bed in one corner, dressed in plain sheets and with a stack of wool blankets at the foot. Besides this, a small table, and a metal chair by the door, the room was bare of furniture. There was a bathroom attached, including a tiny shower; the factory must have involved dirty work. Despite the temptation of a proper wash, Devi walked straight to the bed and flopped down on her stomach. Lacking the energy even to draw the covers over herself, she settled for curling into a ball and burrowing her bare feet under the stack of blankets. She was asleep before the demon closed the door, never hearing the click of the bolt sliding into place.

## 7. Chapter 6: Shelf Life

### \*\*Chapter 6: Shelf Life\*\*

\*\*I had a very bad time with acid. I did that classic thing of looking in the mirror by mistake and seeing the devil. - Robbie Coltrane \*\*

It was still dark when Devishi awoke. There was moonlight filtering through the heavily etched glass of the skylight, painting barred shadows on the floor. She tossed and turned a few times, trying to go back to sleep, but soon gave it up. She supposed her internal clock was still screwed up. Sleep out of the question, she settled for a shower. The minuscule bathroom didn't have a proper shower stall; instead, the concrete floor of the whole room sloped gently to a drain in the center. A plastic curtain hung from a rail attached to the ceiling, cutting the room in half when closed with the shower head on one side and the toilet and sink on the other. It was a rough-and-ready setup, but it worked.

Rising from the bed, Devi noticed something on the chair. Upon examination, she found a basket of toiletries, including a bar of sandalwood soap, shampoo, conditioner, and a toothbrush and toothpaste. Devi frowned, examining the shampoo bottle â€“ it was fairly good quality. Perhaps this was intended as a "reward" for finding the Prophet. She shrugged, and took the basket into the bathroom with her, deciding not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The water pressure in the shower was fitful, coming in stuttering bursts. Devi wasn't sure how much hot water she would have, and in anticipation of running out, she turned it off to lather up. It was a trick she'd learned growing up in a household of six with only one water heater, a necessity especially if she needed to wash her hair. Turning the water back on to rinse, she stretched under the warm stream, trying fruitlessly to ease the tension in her shoulders. Free of suds, she started combing the conditioner through her thick locks with her fingers, tugging gently at the tangles. With no means to tame it, the natural wave in her hair had reasserted itself, resulting in some truly epic frizz. She wished Crowley had thought to include a brush in his little gift-basket.

She lingered as she rinsed off for a second time, savoring the feel of flowing water. How long had it been since she'd had a swim, three weeks? Long, hot showers were soothing, but didn't come close to the moving meditation of gliding weightlessly through water. She longed for the feel of it flowing over her as she moved in the closest facsimile of flight the unaided body could accomplish. The sea was the best. It was enormous and strong and terrifyingly alive, and it was wonderful. Pools were an acceptable substitute, but she always looked forward to the first day of the year the ocean was above 70°, being embraced by the extra buoyancy of salt water that seemed to foster her speed. Diving down, there was the knife-edge severance of sound above to the thick, distant rhythm of waves, a different language for a different world.

Feeling the shower-water flag in temperature, she sighed and released her daydreams. She picked up the towel she'd placed on the toilet seat, in lieu of a towel rack, and wrapped herself in the threadbare

terrycloth. She stayed behind the curtain as she dried off, prolonging the moment she had to release the warm steam. Wrapping the towel around her hair, she dressed in the tiny room; so far, no one had knocked before entering her room, and she didn't expect such consideration to develop anytime soon. She put on a fresh set of scrubs, one of three she had now. Sitting down on the bed and wrapping one of the blankets around her shoulders against the chill, she began combing her fingers through her damp hair as it dried. She glanced up at the skylight, noting the darkness outside had taken on a faint gray tint, suggesting dawn was about an hour away. She wished the glass was clear enough to see stars.

She heard swift, businesslike steps on the metal stairs outside a moment before Crowley's assistant came through the door (without knocking, Devi noticed). The woman snapped her fingers at Devi, and gestured impatiently for her to come. Devi gritted her teeth; few things raised her hackles at work so much as when customers snapped or whistled at for attention, and being "summoned" by a demon hardly made it better.

"What?" she snapped at the suited woman.

"Crowley requires you," the woman said coldly, stepping towards the bed. Devi rose with ill grace, reluctantly putting her bare feet on the concrete floor and shrugging off the blanket. She didn't want to go, but if go she must, she preferred it be on her own rather than being "fetched." The woman sneered, turned on her heel, and set a quick pace from the room. Devi trotted behind her on the now-familiar route to Crowley's office.

They entered the room to find Crowley pacing behind his desk. He was livid. Devi felt a knot form in her stomach â€“ something had clearly gone wrong. Crowley glowered at her with an expression of cold fury.

"He wasn't there," she said numbly, sinking into one of the chairs in front of the desk.

That gave Crowley pause. It seemed as though he'd intended to say something, thought better of it, and began again from a different angle.

"Just missed him, regrettably," he said, "but we have his scent now." He leaned over the desk, resting on his palms, "Not to worry, pet, we'll get him next time."

"Next time, right," Devi said, pinching the bridge of her nose, "I thought..." She trailed off, hunching in her seat. Stupid, she chided herself, You knew better than to think it would just be over. Maybe it would have been easier if they had found Kevin Tran, and Crowley had refused outright to release her. This way, she was still stuck in the dreadful state of not knowing, of maybe, of irrational hope that she couldn't quite let go of. She ran a hand through her hair distractedly, then exhaled forcefully through her nose. "Never mind," she rapped out, rising from the chair and extending her arm, "Let's get this done."

Crowley studied her impassively, his face giving away nothing. She had sucked it up: swallowing back her disappointment, replacing her armor of self-discipline, and focusing on the task at hand. He could

tell she was well-versed in that tactic. He smiled patronizingly, "I appreciate your enthusiasm, darling." He drew a syringe containing the last of the solution from his breast pocket, "Unfortunately, we're running a bit low on mental go-juice; it will take time to make more."

Devi frowned at the vial in his hand, "Does that stuff have an expiration date?"

"Because it was regulation olive-drab when we started this little science project, and now it looks like day-old guacamole," she stated baldly.

He laughed, "Fair enough — this formula does lose effectiveness with time, but should still give you a bit of a boost."

Devi cocked her head at that, "Are you saying it's been getting less and less powerful since we started?" Crowley nodded slowly. "Then why have I been 'seeing' better?"

"Practice makes perfect," he replied, holding out the syringe, "and you're quick study, pet."

"And if I wasn't," she pressed, narrowing her eyes, "would you have told me about the potion's half-life, or just let me take the blame for the lack of results?"

"Turns out it wasn't a problem," Crowley shrugged, "Besides, a bit more schooling, and you won't even need the training wheels."

"I wouldn't define you throwing me in the deep end with cheery 'Do or die' as 'schooling,'" Devi shot back, scowling.

"I have utmost faith in your ability to rise to the occasion," Crowley smirked, extending the vial again.

Devi reached for it, then paused. "Just to clarify," she said, her tone clipped, "You set me a task, gave me some pretty significant stakes, and then undercut my ability to complete it."

"I prefer 'encouraging growth by gradually removing assistance,'" Crowley countered cavalierly.

Devi set her mouth in a thin line, snatched the vial from his hand, and stalked over to the couch. She flopped down as Crowley instructed his assistant to bring the ingredients for the potion.

"Yes, Majesty," she replied, and exited.

Devi glanced up, one eyebrow raised. "You make your staff call you 'Majesty'?" she asked, her tone skeptical, "Like you're some kind of king?"

"\_The\_ King, darling," Crowley corrected.

"Of what, potions class?" she queried, sarcasm skirting the question.

"Of Hell, of course, or haven't you been paying attention?" Crowley corrected, "And technically, this brew is classed as a 'solution'."

Devi rolled her eyes, returning to the task of finding a vein, "It's a liquid substance created by witchcraft for the purpose of enhancing ESP â€“ that's pretty soundly in 'potion' territory, if you ask me." She set the needle in, injected the substance in question, and leaned back against the couch, waiting for it to take effect. "What does Hell even need a king for anyway?" she inquired. She wasn't terrifically interested in the answer, but wanted to distract herself from the rush of nausea the potion had given her.

"It's an extensive, complex, and delicate operation," Crowley replied imperiously, "Someone has to keep things running smoothly."

Devi gave brief laugh, "Right, can't let Hell just go to hell..." Maybe it was the potion, maybe the lack of sleep, but she was feeling stupefied, flippant, and a little bit reckless. She found herself staring at the ceiling lamp, purposely dazzling her vision. Her consciousness slipped out of place, wandering drunkenly toward the targeted person.

Kevin was moving. His location, his mind was hard to zero in, and Devi felt like she was playing catch-up. She saw flashes of a sunlight off a long, lean black car, before falling into place in the back seat. Kevin was looking out the window, not really seeing the landscape passing by. His mind was miles away.

Devi glanced at the two men in front of Kevin. Both were quite tall, and wearing canvas jackets. The driver had short-cropped hair, and slouched behind the wheel in an air of assumed disaffection; he seemed to be channeling James Dean. The other was much more engaged, shifting his gaze from the road to the driver to Kevin and back, his shoulder-length hair swinging as he moved his head. His glance into the back seat revealed a long, angular face etched with concern, eyes delicately outlined with worry, thin lips pursed slightly.

"Hey, Kevin," he said softly, "You wanna grab a bite?" Devi felt Kevin shrug, and the passenger looked to the driver, who wasn't paying attention. The long-haired man tapped him on the shoulder, startling him.

"Huh, what?" the driver looked at his passenger, "What's up?" The passenger raised his eyebrows significantly, and nodded his head subtly to the backseat. "Oh yeah, food sounds good," the driver said, "Hey, Kev, any preferences?" Seeing Kevin's shrug, he grinned, "Alright, burgers it is."

The car pulled off the road into the parking lot of a burger stand with an outdoor seating area. Devi was relieved; keeping up with the car had nearly exhausted her. As the men exited the car, they both glanced around the area, hands on pockets. Only after the taller one nodded did Kevin get out. He walked slowly to the one of the tables and plopped down on the plastic bench. The taller man came over and sat next to him. After a moment, he started to speak, but something was wrong. His words came out warped and garbled, and the feature of his face started running like chalk-lines on a wet sidewalk.

Devi's breath caught in her chest, and she suddenly was aware of a

sharp pains in her sides. Her vision spun, whiting out at the edges as the sunlight became painfully bright. She squinted into the glare, and raised a hand to shield her eyes. There was a irritatingly high-pitched buzzing in her ears, and it felt like something unclean had crawled into her mouth to die. She gagged, her body convulsing as she rolled to her side, fighting to catch her breath.

"Mind her head!" a gruff voice warned, and she felt several sets of hands trying to hold her still. She feebly attempted to prize them off, before a coughing fit distracted her. The smell of sick reached her, and she bit back the urge to retch again, spitting to rid her mouth of the taste. Someone was pressing a bowl filled with some sort of fluid to her lips, telling her to drink. She sputtered and drew back. Whoever it was lay a heavy hand on the back of her neck, forcing her head down into the bowl, like a kitten in a saucer of milk. "Drink," the voice ordered again brusquely, and Devi complied to keep from being drowned in the stuff. It tasted vegetal, with a slight scent of evergreen and a slick texture; nothing spectacular, but better than the fuzz on her tongue. It felt cool going down, and her stomach settled as the liquid reached it. Her body relaxed slightly, and she managed to draw a shaky breath.

"That's a girl," the voice soothed, and Crowley's face came into view, "You had us worried there for a moment, pet." Devi glanced around; she was in the same room where she'd recovered from her first dose of the sight potion. The twitchy demon was back, along with two burlier men who must have been the ones holding her down. She rolled on her back, regretting it immediately as the lamp overhead nearly blinded her. She threw an arm over her eyes with a groan, and heard Crowley chuckle. "Feeling a bit hung-over, are we?" he asked.

Devi had never been hung-over, but if it was anything like this, she swore she would never have more than one drink at a time for the rest of her life. "What happened?" she moaned.

"You've had what the kids call 'a bad trip,'" Crowley answered, "Seems that brew was a bit more far-gone than anticipated."

Devi glared at him from under her arm, "And you let me take it anyway."

"You seemed so eager, darling," he winked, "I didn't want to dampen your ardor."

"Or you just wanted to see what would happen," Devi shot back. She rubbed her palms against her eyes, "Ugh, I knew that stuff was sketchy. Why did I listen to you?"

"Maybe you were just as curious as I was," Crowley suggested, grinning. Devi looked away, scowling. "Anyway," Crowley continued, "did you see anything interesting during your magical mystery tour?"

Devi stared back at him in disbelief. She had nearly died thanks to his little experiment, and he still expected her to bring him information. "Can we even trust anything I saw?" she pointed out, "There wasn't much, and it didn't make much sense in the end."

"We'll work with what we have," he pressed coolly.

Devi sighed, and began, "Kevin's mobile. He was in a car with two other men, but I don't know where they were going. I had trouble locking on this time, but I don't know if it was your potion, or the fact that he was in a moving vehicle. They stopped for food, and that's when things got weird. Everything started shifting out of place and running together. I couldn't hear properly, either."

Crowley stroked his beard, "This car, it wouldn't have happened to be an ancient, over-powered Impala, would it?"

Devi frowned pensively, "I don't know much about cars, but it was an old-fashioned model, black, and it sounded powerful."

"So he's still with them," Crowley said, mostly to himself, "Not surprising, but it always pays to be sure." After a few moments of contemplation, he turned back to her, "The next batch will be ready in a day or so. Then we'll get something actionable. In the meantime, that draught I gave you will make you sleep," he cocked an eyebrow at her, "You need it."

Devi wasn't comfortable with the idea of being sedated, especially without her knowledge, but her eyelids were already feeling heavy. She gave a soft growl of protest as he pressed her back against the hospital bed. When this is over, she promised herself, I'm not taking any medication, not even cough syrup, for a month. That was the last coherent thought she had before succumbing to sleep.

## 8. Chapter 7: Far Afield

**\*\*Chapter 7: Far Afield\*\***

\*\*Crucial to science education is hands-on involvement â€“ Martin Rees\*

Kevin's gaze was fixed on nothing in particular, the relentlessly flat terrain offering little to catch the eye. There hadn't been much in the way of scenery since they'd passed Chicago, and as such, there was nothing to take his mind off the task ahead. There was a faint burning on his left arm, and he rubbed at it absentmindedly.

"Kevin, are you listening to me?" A voice broke through the reverie, and Kevin turned to a woman seated beside him. She was roughly his height, maybe a little shorter, but she held herself like a countess. Her black hair was cut in a sensible, angled bob, and her thin mouth was pursed.

"Sorry, mom," Kevin replied softly, and Devi realized it was the first time she'd heard him speak. He had a nice voice. He wasn't paying much attention to the conversation his mother was having by herself. His mind was far afield, and Devi couldn't pinpoint anything beyond his dueling anxiety and anticipation.

"As I was saying, once we have the tablet, how long will it take to complete the spell?" his mother asked.

"Not sure," Kevin replied, "I didn't decipher everything that's involved. Once I realized what was on the tablet, I figured I should

keep it safe, away from me." He looked up at the tall man in passenger seat, who'd turned around to listen, "Just in case Crowley found me."

"Pretty smart," the passenger confirmed.

"Yeah, but couldn't you have salted it away a little closer to home?" the driver complained.

"It was the closest safe place to where I was when I escaped," Kevin explained.

"I was thinking, if we finish with this Hell matter soon enough, we can see about getting you enrolled for the spring semester," his mother said, "Your SAT results should still apply." Kevin seemed surprised. "What?" she defended, "You want something to do after all this supernatural nonsense is over, don't you?"

"I guess so," Kevin replied, "I haven't really thought that far in advance."

"Well, you can't let opportunity slip away," his mother pressed, "You don't want to be stuck in this job market without a degree."

"Sure, mom," Kevin said, shifting his attention back to the window. The passenger noticed his distraction, and started talking to Mrs. Tran about college applications. Kevin appreciated his taking the heat off. It was going to be a long drive.

\* \* \*

><p>Devishi rolled over, shifting her arm from under her head. She opened bleary eyes to stare at the worn iron girders of the ceiling. Her other arm ached dullly, and she pawed at the IV "they must have put it in while she slept. She took a deep breath, attempting to sort out what she'd just seen, when a voice from the darkness startled her.</p>

"Did you see anything?" Crowley was sitting to one side of her bed, straddling a chair backwards with his arms on the backrest, head propped on one hand. He'd apparently been watching her sleep.

Devi jumped bodily, putting a hand on her chest as if to still her racing heart. "\_Tatti!\_ Don't do that!" she spat.

"Such language," Crowley tsked, tilting his head to one side to regard her with narrowed eyes, "So, did you see anything?"

Devi gave an irritated snort, "I'm fine, thanks." She fiddled with the IV feed, glancing at the drip bag before looking back to him. "Dosing me again already?" she asked testily.

"That?" Crowley nodded to the needle in her arm, "That's just saline, darling. A precaution against further degrading your delicate system."

Devi looked again at the stand, confused, "Then..."

"If you've been seeing," he continued, rising from his chair, "you did it on your own." He looked down at her with a thin smile, "So,

any news from the front?"

"Kevin was in the car with those two men again," Devi related, "and someone else, a woman. Kevin called her 'mom.'" Crowley's smile disappeared, but he didn't say anything, so Devi continued, "They were going to get a, a tablet, they called it â€“ something about a spell."

Crowley made an affirmative sound in his throat, before asking, "Did you see anything that could tell you where they are?"

>"There wasn't a lot to see â€“ someplace very flat. Devi closed her eyes, picturing the road, "There was a sign for an exit to State Route 173; the town was Elk Horn, I think." She heard a sharp intake of breath, but when she opened her eyes, Crowley's expression was neutral.<p>

"Interesting," he mused, putting a finger to his lips. His eyes flicked back to her, "Feeling recovered yet, darling? I should think so, after a day and night's sleep."

"Yes," Devi answered cautiously, suspicious of his sudden solicitation.

"Good," he said decisively, "because you and I will be taking a little field trip."

\* \* \*

><p>Devi looked out the window of the executive suite of the luxury hotel Crowley had selected as his residence in absentia<em>. <em>He had carefully avoided any mention of where they were, but Devi had seen "Cheyenne" on the room brochure under the hotel's name. Judging from the mountains in the distance, she guessed that meant Wyoming. She didn't remember the trip to the city lasting long, but she had been asleep for most of it. Crowley had insisted on leaving immediately, despite it being the middle of the night, and since the sedative he'd given her before had still been in effect, she'd nodded off before they reached the airport. She hadn't expected Crowley's men to be gentle enough to move her from the car without waking her, but when she came to, she was laying in the expansive king bed in the hotel suite.

She'd followed the sound of voices to the main room, and found Crowley giving instructions to his staff. He'd stopped talking abruptly when he saw her peeking out of the bedroom door, smiling and beckoning her closer.

"Well, look who's awake," he'd chuckled, gesturing to the plush couch. She'd sat down, looking at his two men out of the corner of her eye. "Now, I've some business to attend to in town," he began, "so these lads here will be keeping an eye on you while I'm gone."

"You're leaving?" Devi asked, apprehension growing. She neither liked nor trusted the demon in front of her, but she at least had a strange sort of accord with him. The grim, silent sentinels looked no more pleased with the arrangement than she was.

"Just for a bit, darling," he'd said, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear, "In the meantime, I want you stay here and unwind.

Order room service, watch pay-per-view, catch up on sleep, perhaps."

"I think I've had enough sleep," she'd replied, her tone snippier than she'd intended. She doubted having two demons next door would be very restful. "Why am I here, really?" she'd pressed, "I thought I was supposed to be finding your prophet."

Crowley raised an eyebrow at the challenge. "You want to put your nose back at the grindstone already, pet?" he'd said in feigned surprise.

"It's what you wanted me for," Devi pointed out.

"Granted, and you're as capable of doing it from here as anywhere else," he'd replied.

Devi's shoulders slumped slightly, but in an odd way, she'd been relieved — at least now she knew what was required of her. She'd held out her arm expectantly, but Crowley waved her off.

"Nah. None of that," he'd said, "I want to see what you can do without chemical assistance." Devi had tried to protest, but he'd dismissed her concern with a gesture, "Trust me, darling, you might find it easier than you think."

That had been hours ago. She had moved to the window to avoid a staring contest with her guards, for she was certain that's what they were. Even so, the sense of being watched made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Finally, she fled to the bedroom, muttering something about taking a shower. Might as well enjoy it while I can, she thought. She made full use of the hotel's nearly endless supply of hot water, staying far longer in the marble and glass shower block than any necessity might require. Stepping out into the steam-filled room, she shrugged on a complimentary bathrobe and wrapped her hair in a plush towel. She found a hairdryer in the drawer under the sink, but was slightly disappointed at the lack of a brush.

Remembering a small bag left on the luggage stand, she ventured back into the bedroom and opened it. Inside, she found several changes of clothes apparently intended for her, all dresses. Why Crowley had bothered packing them when he clearly meant for her to stay in the room was beyond her, but all the same, she set out a simple linen surplice dress in a deep wine-red. There were no pants or trousers, but she was glad to find a pair of shoes, ballet-flats in supple gray leather. Crowley had taste, and a preference for quality. She had just slipped the dress over her head when she became aware of voices in the outer room.

"I hate getting stuck pet-sitting," one complained, "Why'd he even bring her?"

"Beats me. Maybe he plans on trading her," a second replied. Devi's stomach dropped like a stone. They could only be talking about her. The fan in the bathroom was on, so they must have assumed she was still in there.

The first speaker snorted, "Please, she can't be that valuable. There are plenty of seers."

"Maybe, but not many that can see beyond their own bloodline, unassisted," the second voice countered.

"But she can?" the first voice sounded incredulous. Devi felt oddly insulted.

"Yeah, I heard she made the Prophet on his way over here, no potion. Don't know how much that counts for on the market, though; doubt it'll be enough to match something like the Word of God."

The first chuckled, "Either way, if he gets the tablet and the little shit who can read it, he won't need her anymore. Might as well get something for her."

Devi backed slowly away from the door; she'd heard enough. She wasn't sure what they meant by "Word of God," but this was the second time she'd heard the tablet mentioned. It sounded like it was one of the texts that needed a Prophet to read it. That didn't matter to her nearly as much as the rest of the conversation. If Crowley meant to sell her, she could barely imagine what that might mean. She drew a shuddering breath, fighting to quell her panic. She had to be calm, to think. It would be impossible for her to fight her way out. She needed a distraction, something to get at least one of them out of the room. Where's an emergency when you need one? she thought.

## 9. Chapter 8: Bait and Switch

**\*\*Chapter 8: Bait and Switch\*\***

\*\*noun: the ploy of offering a person something desirable to gain favor then thwarting expectations with something less desirable â€“ Merriam-Webster\*\*

Devishi dashed across the roof, startling a flock of pigeons. She knew she likely had only a few seconds before her time played out. She headed for the door to the staircase on the other side of the building, jerking the handle towards her as she reached it. When she opened it, she heard the sound of heavy, hurried steps on the stairs below. Releasing the door as if it was red hot, she cut towards the edge of the building. Looking over the safety wall, she glanced up and down the sides of the hotel, hoping for a fire-escape â€“ there was none. Probably clashed with the aesthetics, Devi thought, cursing Crowley for picking a hotel too classy for such a thing. There was, however, a concrete ledge running around the top of the outer wall, part of the ornate facade. It was an enormous risk, but she was out of options.

She'd only just swung one leg over the wall when someone grabbed her from behind and dragged her back onto the roof. She kicked out blindly at the mass behind her, connecting with what felt like a knee. The man grappling with her hardly noticed, gritting his teeth as he attempted to get a better hold on her. As she pulled away, he grabbed her right bicep and jerked her sharply towards him. Devi heard a soft, sickening pop and immediately felt a dull throb spread from her shoulder, tingling all the way to her fingertips. The pain increased tenfold when her assailant shifted to pin the injured arm behind her back, and Devi let out a strangled yell. The man behind her brought his spare forearm across her throat, cutting off her air

and pulling her flush to his chest as he spat curses in her ear. Devi squirmed in his arms, trying to step back onto his foot, and he gave her right arm another vicious twist. She saw stars.

"That's enough," she heard Crowley's voice say, and the pressure on her shoulder decreased a tiny bit. Opening her eyes, she saw she was back in the hotel room. I must have passed out, she thought. Crowley gripped her chin, turning her face back towards him.

"What do you think you're doing?" he hissed softly. He was angry. Flippin' good for him, Devi thought; that made two of them. She clenched her jaw, scowling at him, and said nothing.

"Found her on the roof," the man holding her said, "She was going over the wall." Crowley raised his eyebrows at that before looking back at her.

"Not thinking of doing something desperate, were we?" he asked.

"You mean jump?" Devi laughed humorlessly.

Crowley narrowed his eyes at her, "I'm a bit disappointed by this little outburst. I thought we were making excellent progress."

"Is that why you were planning on selling me off for that tablet?" Devi spat out. Crowley seemed shocked, but she wasn't sure if it was the accusation itself or that she knew about the tablet.

"How did you—" he began.

"Thin walls and big mouths," Devi snapped, nodding to his henchmen.

Crowley gave an exasperated look to the two guards, "So it was you cretins who frightened her out of her wits." He turned back, considering her closely. "I have no intention of 'selling you off,'" he said, and Devi snorted contemptuously. He pursed his lips and continued, "For one thing, you not nearly valuable enough. You've had a few visions, sure, but the tablet — that's a whole different game." He smiled thinly, "To even get close, I'd have to throw you in with something important, like Antarctica."

"You own Antarctica?" Devi asked, unbelieving. There was a hint of pride in his smirk. "I'm sure controlling of the world supply of Emperor Penguins is a great boon to your work," she added sardonically.

"Resources, darling," he corrected, "There are things down there you can't imagine."

"A temple to Cthulhu, maybe?" she asked, one eyebrow slanted. The demon holding her tightened his grip, tweaking her shoulder again, and she grimaced. At that moment, there was a knock at the door, and a female voice called out, "Room Service."

Crowley quickly stepped forward and clapped a broad hand over Devi's mouth. "One word, and she dies," he said to her, deadly serious. Devi glared balefully at him, but made no attempt to speak. The second demon guard answered the door, blocking the maid's view with his broad shoulders and wheeling her cart in himself before shutting the

door in her face. Crowley dropped his hand and nodded the first guard off. The man shoved her unceremoniously onto the couch before stalking back to the door. Devi shot a hateful look after him, sitting up and cradling her arm. Crowley sighed, slipping his hands into his pockets and looking down at her with an expression of long-suffering.

"What were you doing on the roof?" he asked, "You weren't planning on jumping, were you?"

"Your concern is touching," she said, bitterly sarcastic. She felt the cushions shift as he sat beside her, again turning her face towards him.

"I'm looking out for my investment," he said firmly, scrutinizing her eyes. He thinks I'm cracking up, Devi realized, that this was an act of hysterics.

"I was trying to find the fire-escape," she said simply, "The west staircase was... occupied."

"And going over the wall?" Crowley pressed, cocking an eyebrow.

Devi made an exasperated noise, "There was a ledge on the other side; I was going to hide there until Stairmaster 3000 over there went away."

Crowley looked somewhat relieved. "Why go up there in the first place?" he asked.

"As soon as he," she jerked her head towards the guards, "figured out I wasn't in the room anymore, he'd come after me. It would be reasonable for him to assume I'd make for the lobby  $\text{à}€$  stairs or elevator, he'd think I was going down."

Crowley leaned back, comprehension dawning, "So you went up instead."

Devi nodded, "Waited until I heard him crashing down a few floors below, then pulled the fire alarm. Extra chaos could only help." She shrugged, "I was going to take the other staircase down and go out the back door."

"Then hot-wire a car and drive to Vegas, I suppose," Crowley suggested.

Devi scowled, annoyed at his nit-picking, "By the time I got to the ground floor, they would have probably figured out they missed me and come back up to comb this level, see if I was hiding in a corner somewhere," she clarified, "Hopefully, the fire department would have showed up about then."

"Hmm, and then what?" Crowley pressed, his smile slowly spreading, "Where were you going to run to?" She blinked, irritated, and he grinned fully, "Home, maybe? Someplace safe?"

Devi looked away. She hadn't really gotten that far; she'd been making things up as she went. Perhaps she'd have tried to get to a church or a temple, some place of worship. That would have gone over well, she thought, "Excuse me, Father, do you know anything about

getting rid of demons? Because there's about a dozen right behind me." —

"Didn't think about that, eh?" Crowley chuckled, "not a bad effort, for working on the fly. One thing, though. I know he," he pointed to the demon who'd answered the door, "was ordering take-out, at your insistence. This one," he pointed to the one who'd caught her on the roof, "has been a little unclear as to what he was doing."

Devi shot a wicked grin at the henchman in question. "Aw, are you embarrassed?" she asked, her tone treacle-sweet. The grunt scowled. She turned back to Crowley. "I told him my period started, and I needed some 'lady things,'" she said, her face completely straight, as though daring the demon king to make a comment. To his credit, he didn't turn a hair, besides giving his crony a look that would have been pitying if it weren't so full of contempt.

"Well, full marks for inventiveness," he shrugged, standing, "Let me see that shoulder." Devi drew back from him, clutching her arm to herself. "Uh-uh, pet, you got yourself into this," he chided, grinning as he seized her wrist, "Now be a good girl, and take your medicine." He held her shoulder firmly with his other hand, and pulled her arm towards him, a twisted smirk on his face. The joint slid gratingly back into place and Devi bit back a scream, settling for a ragged groan instead. She fell back against the arm of the couch and squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself not to cry.

She felt a glass at her lips, smelled alcohol, and tried to push it away. "Don't make me tell you again," Crowley's voice was cold, imperious, and deadly soft as he tilted the glass at her mouth. Devi took a small sip and forced herself to swallow, feeling the bitter heat creep down her throat. "That's a girl," he sneered. She managed a few more mouthfuls before the burn set her coughing.

He straightened and regarded her coolly, "Considering circumstances, I'm willing to let this little indiscretion of yours slide." His voice took on an edge, "But make no mistake: you try to bolt again, and there will be consequences," he leaned down, staring her dead in the face, "and not just for you." Devi dropped her gaze, but he caught her chin and raised her eyes back to his. "Are we clear?" he finished.

"Yes," Devi answered grudgingly, fear and anger struggling for dominance in her stomach.

"Splendid," he breathed, leaning back. He raised her from the couch by her uninjured arm and marched her to the bedroom, pushing her in and closing the door behind her. Devi heard a few muttered words and the handle rattled — he'd somehow locked it from the outside. She sighed, hugging herself and rubbing at her sore shoulder as she looked back at the bed. Crowley clearly wanted her to get back to work, though how he expected her to sleep after getting all worked up, she didn't know.

She sank down on the bed, running over what had just happened in her mind. She doubted she'd get another chance, now that her guards were on high alert. She pursed her lips, angry at herself; if only she'd been a bit faster getting over the wall, it might have worked. After nearly a dozen repetitions of the scenario, she had only frustrated herself further. She flopped back on the bed with a sigh. Her eyes

felt heavy, and her head was fuzzy. Maybe she was tired after all.

## 10. Chapter 9: Lockdown

\*\*Chapter 9: Lockdown \*\*

\_\*\*An unlocked door means that, occasionally, you might get a devil come in, but a locked door means you have thousands of angels just walk by.

>- Ian MacKaye<strong>\_

Crowley slipped into the suite's plush bedroom, closing the door behind him. His asset lay curled up near the head of the bed, the comforter wrapped around her like a shroud. In addition to the pillow under her head, she had one against her back and another clutched to her chest.\_ Nestled in like a little dormouse,\_ he thought with a grin; he supposed that made him the Cheshire Cat. He tapped a finger against her temple, and she burrowed further into the covers with a murmur of disapproval.

"Wakey, wakey," he said, slightly louder than necessary. The girl groaned and rolled over, squinting at him.

"What time is it?," she asked groggily.

"A little after midnight," Crowley answered. The girl didn't care for that answer, but he cut off her protest, "We have work to do."

The seer sat up, rubbing her eyes, "Ugh, did you roofie me? Again?"

"Not this time, pet," Crowley smirked, peering at her out of the corner of his eye, "Just an old Scottish remedy for insomnia."

Devishi glared at him, "You know I'm nineteen, right?"

"Twenty, now," Crowley corrected, teasing, "You're a bit young to be lying about your age, darling." Devi frowned â€“ she had lost all reckoning of the date days ago. The eighth must have come and gone without her knowing. "Come on," Crowley snapped his fingers impatiently, "I need a location on the Prophet immediately; we won't get another chance like this."

"What's happened?" the seer asked as she untangled herself from the covers, "I thought you were..." She stopped suddenly as the memory of her vision swelled over her.

\* \* \*

><p>Kevin had been in large room in a disused industrial building of some sort. There were sigils on every unbroken pane of glass in the windows, wards on the walls and doors. Rows of chairs filled most of the room, various people seated in them. They were facing a small stage or dais, on which sat a bored-looking, balding man in his fifties wearing a velour tracksuit and reading a newspaper. Kevin was seated between his mother and the tall, long-haired passenger from the car. On a table before the dais was an enormous hammer with

Celtic carvings in the head. A man in a pinstriped three-piece suit seemed to be conducting an auction, taking bids from the crowd. A skinny old man in a fedora was holding up a mummified finger that was as long as his entire hand.<p>

"A finger bone from from the frost giant, Ymir," he offered. The man in the pinstripes looked to the stage, noting a shake of the head from the other man, which Pinstripes relayed back to the bidder. The old man's face fell, then brightened, and he held up a brown paper bag, the lower half of which was soaked in blood, "And five-eighths of a virgin." Tracksuit nodded to this, and the hammer was sold.

Kevin looked over as the driver from the car came through the door and dropped into a seat, looking disgruntled.

"Plan C tanked," he said.

"Maybe you should try Plan D, for 'dumb-ass,'" Crowley's voice came from behind, and Kevin turned to look at him. Devi felt a surge of emotion from the Prophet, fear being predominant. The presence of the demon king made his very skin crawl.

"Our next lot: the Word of God," Pinstripes announced, "Capital 'G,' very old, very rare."

"Three billion dollars," Crowley bid, his tone precise and grandiose. He didn't seem to expect any real competition, but a young man from the back row in a "Wiener Hut" uniform spoke up.

"The Mona Lisa," was his offer.

"The real Mona Lisa," Crowley countered, "where she's topless."

"Vatican City," the young man replied, to audible gasps.

"Alaska," Crowley said, beginning to look peeved.

"Palin, and a bridge to nowhere," Pinstripes dismissed, "No thanks."

"Alright, the moon," Crowley raised. He had to be kidding. The driver turned with an expression equal parts confusion and incredulity.

"You're bidding the Moon?!" he asked.

Crowley shrugged, "Yeah, claimed it for Hell. You think a man named 'Buzz' gets to go into space without making a deal?"

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, it seems our reserve price has not been met," Pinstripes stated apologetically, "So, in order to stimulate the bidding, we're going to add an item to this lot â€“ Kevin Tran: Prophet of the Lord." Kevin found himself transported onto stage, shackled to a banister, to the shock of his mother. "Mister Tran is the only person on earth who can read this tablet, which makes them a perfect matching set," Pinstripes continued with a genial grin. "So, do I hear a bid of—" Pinstripes began, only to be cut off by Kevin's mother.

"No, stop! I'll give you whatever you want," she pleaded, "I have a 401k, my house..." Tracksuit chuckled from his armchair.

"Good effort, Ms. Tran," Pinstripes admonished, "but I'm afraid this is a little out of your price range."

Mrs. Tran took a shaky breath, "My soul."

"Mom, don't!" Kevin yelled.

"I bid my soul," his mother repeated, firm now.

"You sure?" the driver asked her, "That's a big move." She nodded determinedly. Tracksuit suddenly seemed interested.

"If it's souls that you're after," Crowley countered, full of confidence, "I can give you a million souls." The driver turned in his seat, pressing the young man from Wiener Hut to bid. The young man shook his head.

"We guard the souls in Heaven," he said firmly, "We don't horse-trade them." So there's a Heaven, too, Devi thought, What does that make him?

"So we have a deal?" Crowley pressed.

"It's not about the quantity, chief," Tracksuit said, "it's about the sacrifice." His gaze shifted to Mrs. Tran, "This little lady's soul is the most valuable thing she has â€“ it's everything. Are you prepared to offer everything, Mr. Crowley?"

Crowley seemed to hesitate a moment. "Fine, you win," he said finally, "I bid my own soul."

Tracksuit let out a wheezy laugh, "Mr. Crowley, you don't have a soul." He turned back to Mrs. Tran, "Congrats sweetheart." Crowley left the room, his face stormy.

Kevin stared at his mother, disconsolate. As Tracksuit's men took him to a back room to wait, his mind was a blur. Memories warred with plans of escape, each more desperate than the last. Clenching his teeth, he pressed his hands to the sides of his head, as though it would force his brain to work better. Suddenly, he stopped and glanced around the room. Something had grabbed his attention, the smallest tug on his subconscious, but he only saw the men who'd had brought him here. An oddly familiar prickle of apprehension ran over him, and recognition struck him like a bolt: it was the feeling of being watched.

He looked up as he was abruptly moved to another room, and saw his companions and his mother, as well as the auctioneer and the host. The tablet lay on the table. The latter was holding out both hands to Kevin's mom, who hesitated a moment before extending her own hand.

"Wait!" the driver leapt forward, grabbing her wrist and pulling back the sleeve to reveal a terrible burn on the inside of her forearm. The woman's eyes flicked blood-red.

"Hello, boys," Crowley's voice slid out of her mouth. She flung both arms to the side, and the men were thrown against opposite walls by some invisible force.

Tracksuit was aghast, "No, you can't... my warding spells..."

"Mrs. Tran" smiled tightly, "Your Girl Friday showed me a few loopholes." Her voice was her own now, but she still spoke with Crowley's clipped pronunciation, "and all it cost me was an island in the South Pacific" I love a bargain." Pinstripes rammed a thick wooden spike straight through his former boss. Crowley pulled the log out from the man's body and threw it at the guard with enough force to impale him. "Can't do all my tricks," Crowley continued, reaching for the tablet, "but I can do enough."

"Get out of her!" Kevin yelled.

"If I had a nickle for every time someone screamed that at me..." Crowley smirked, and headed for the door. The long-haired passenger had hauled himself up by now, and took down Mrs. Tran with a flying tackle. The driver fished a knife out of a box of weapons, and both men moved to stand between the possessed woman and Kevin.

"Gettin' in touch with your feminine side, huh Crowley?" the driver taunted, "Well, come and get him." Mrs. Tran considered the men before "her" for a moment, then abruptly bolted for the door. The driver gave chase, and Kevin tried to follow, but the passenger caught his arm.

"Kevin, don't!" he said, "Let Dean take care of it."

"Sam, move!" Kevin shouted as Pinstripes pulled a gun. The treacherous man fired wildly on Sam, driving him behind an overturned table, before training the gun on Kevin as the Prophet tried to flee the room.

"You know what's better than a private island?" the man with the gun asked, "Two private islands." Well, that's just impractical, Devi thought.

Sam appeared behind him, wielding the hammer from earlier in the auction. The impact shattered Pinstripes head like a melon. Kevin ran out of the room after Dean and his mother. He found them in the lobby, grappling against a pillar. Dean had a blade at the possessed woman's throat. At Kevin's cry, Dean looked back over his shoulder, giving Mrs. Tran the chance to shove him back. Red smoke erupted from her mouth, swirling around the room and under a door. Mrs. Tran slumped against the wall, eyes open, but unseeing. The door opened and Crowley appeared in his usual body, dusting himself off.

"Well, that was exciting," he said, before leaning over to pick up the tablet, which had been dropped in the scuffle. "Good luck closing the gates to Hell," he held up the stone "without this." He looked to where Kevin was crouched near his mother. "Surprising what 'Mommy Dearest' has rattling around in her head," Crowley said smugly, "Wanna know who your real father is?" Kevin looked at his mother in shock, and Crowley grinned, "Scandalous!"

"Crowley!" Dean snarled, cutting him off. Crowley sneered at the man briefly, before turning back to Kevin.

"I know we're not mates, Kevin," he told him, "but one word of advice: run. Run far and run fast. 'Cause the Winchesters, well, they have a habit of using people up, and watching them die bloody."

Kevin looked back down at his mother, still unresponsive, as Crowley casually strolled out of the room. Sam came up the hall, and helped Kevin move his mother back to the auction room. Kevin's storm of emotion had coalesced into a quiet rage. He sat across from her, head bowed, one hand on her knee, before looking at Dean.

"You tried to kill her," he accused. Dean at least seemed rueful, but Kevin cut him off as the older man began to explain. "Shut up! I don't want to hear any more of your crappy speeches" Kevin said tersely, "I just want to talk to my mom, alone." The men withdrew to corridor, and Kevin looked up at his mother. "Mom," he began brokenly, before taking a deep breath, "We have to go. Now." He scribbled a quick note on a piece of notebook paper, and left it on a chair. "It's not safe for us to be with Sam and Dean anymore," Kevin continued, helping the catatonic woman to her feet, "but I promise, I'll do everything I can to keep you safe."

\* \* \*

><p>Devi gasped as she fell back into her own body. Crowley was looking back at her, his gaze evaluative.</p>

"What did you see?" he asked.

"The auction," Devi answered, "Kevin's mom bought the tablet, and then..." She looked accusingly at the demon, "And then you possessed her."

Crowley waved a hand dismissively, "Yes, yes, enough about my adventures in transgenderism. What happened after?"

Devi suddenly felt reticent to tell Crowley what she'd seen. Kevin had been in such a shattered state when she had left his mind, and letting Crowley in on him now seemed like a betrayal. Crowley noticed her silence. He walked back to her slowly, eyes narrowing.

"Why the hesitation, darling, hm?" he asked, "something bothering you?"

Devi swallowed hard, "I... um, I'm not sure..." She drew her lower lip between her teeth, avoiding the demon's gaze. He closed the distance between them, peering down into her face.

"Lying to me at this juncture would be extremely unwise," he said softly, and she looked up at him with wide eyes. "You've already got one strike against you today," Crowley continued, "Don't test me further."

"He, um... he was upset about his mother," Devi explained, trying to give the minimum amount of information, "and he was angry at the guys with him. He thought that one was going to kill her."

"And?" Crowley pressed, not fooled.

"So, he, uh, decided to take his mom and go," Devi finished lamely.

"By himself?" Crowley specified, "Without those two overgrown muppets?" Devi nodded reluctantly, and Crowley grinned; it wasn't a reassuring sight. "Excellent," he said to himself, "Now we just need to pin him before he skips town. Come on." He gestured for her to follow and she trailed behind him to the sitting room. Crowley pointed to couch, "Sit." Devi complied, and the demon drew a large syringe from his coat-pocket, filled with green fluid.

"I thought we were done with that stuff," Devi said, filling with dread. She hadn't realized how glad she'd been to do without the potion for the last few days, and now, going back on the brew seemed like a terrible prospect.

"We're on a schedule here," Crowley replied tersely, "We don't have time for you to drift around random psyches until you find him." He took her right arm in hand and Devi felt the pull in her shoulder, still tender and swollen, before the flood of sensation swept over her like an oily tide.

Kevin was fiddling with some wires under the steering wheel of a car, trying to get a spark.

"Come on, come on," he muttered under his breath. Finally, the engine turned over. Kevin crawled out from under the console, and hurried to his mother, grabbing her arm. "We gotta go, mom," he said, "It's not safe here."

Mrs. Tran seemed dazed, "Shouldn't we wait for the Win-"

"We can't stay with them, mom," Kevin cut her off, leading her to the passenger side, "We're better off on our own." He slid into the driver's seat as his mother tried to understand what was happening.

"When did you get this car?" she asked.

Kevin made an exasperated noise as he popped open the glove box, rifling around for a map, "Okay, we should head..." His voice trailed off, and he took a quick glance around the car. Seeing no-one, he shifted into drive. "I've warded the car, and the hex bags hide us from demons," he said, more to himself than his mom, as if ticking off a mental checklist, "Those won't help with people, so we have to keep moving, stay under the radar." He headed for the freeway, doubling back a few times; his instincts were screaming that he was being followed, but he couldn't see anyone. He shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs from his brain.

As he did so, Devi felt her focus on him slip, and she scrambled to regain it. Kevin gritted his teeth, trying to put aside the intuition, and Devi slipped again. She tried to latch her sight onto the car itself, hoping to regain her hold on the Prophet. "I'm not going back," she heard Kevin whisper fiercely. He was trying to encourage himself, but at his statement, and the accompanying surge of determination, Devi felt herself flung fully from his mind.

"What? What's happened?" Crowley's voice was at her ear. She must

have made some sound at being psychically tossed out.

"I don't know, I..." she shook her head, "I can't keep hold. I'm losing him!"

"Do not lose him," Crowley growled.

Devi clung to the car as her only link to the Prophet. She tried settling on his mother's mind instead, but everything was still disrupted and chaotic from her being possessed. Devi tried Kevin's mind again, but encountered what she could only describe as a force pressing against her psyche. She pushed back, letting out an audible groan, and the force intensified. Her focus fractured again as she felt a stabbing pain build behind her eyes; her senses were reverting to her own body in an effort to escape the pressure. She clenched her teeth, struggling, but the harder she fought, the stronger the opposition was. She opened her eyes with a gasp.

"I told you to keep on him," Crowley snarled.

"I tried!" Devi protested, "He, he pushed me out somehow."

Crowley looked suspicious. "I'm giving you another dose," he decided.

"No, don't!" Devi pulled away, "You don't understand, he..."

"No arguments," he snapped, seizing her wrist and jamming home the needle, "You're going to try again." He narrowed his eyes at her. "And this time, you will stay on him," he snarled. The seer struggled to speak as the double portion of the serum hit her, shoving her mind back into the void.

## 11. Chapter 10: Setbacks and Serpentine

\*\*Chapter 10: Set-backs and Serpentine\*\*

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say..."  
Genesis 3:1\*\*

The girl lay on the hospital bed, finally still. She had been seizing off and on for the last hour, and her breathing was still heavy and uneven. Her flushed skin contrasted with the bruises forming around the leather restraints on her wrists and ankles. They'd strapped her down after she tore out the IV for the third time, leaving scratches on her arm where she'd clawed at the needle. Her eyes were open, but unfocused, the pupils unnaturally large, and though her lips moved, her throat was too dry to articulate anything.

Not that it matters, Crowley thought; the girl had hardly spoken for the last two days, mostly in Hindi. The heart monitor read out a rapid staccato of beeps as Crowley scowled down at her inert form. When had he lost control? They'd been right on top of the Prophet in Wyoming. The auction hadn't gone quite to plan, sure, but he'd managed to come out ahead, securing the tablet as well as an additional source of information. Catching Kevin as he ducked out of the Winchesters' witness protection program should have been a cinch, but then his eye in the sky had to have a breakdown.

"How long can we keep her like this?" he asked the twitchy demon watching the monitor feed. The underling produced a penlight, shining it in the girl's eyes.

"Still unresponsive," he muttered, "at this dose, she won't last the week."

Crowley turned away with a snarl, \_One bloody thing after another. \_At the hotel in Cheyenne, he'd given her four times the usual amount, and still she could only catch glimpses, or so she claimed. The real shame was that she appeared to be developing a tolerance for the sedative effects of the potion. Even after the third shot, she'd been awake enough to ask him to stop. He recalled her feebly clutching at his sleeve, pleading "No more."

"Sir?" his associate pressed, "Should we cut the dose?"

Crowley looked back at the girl in the bed, contemplating his options. If he maxed her out, finding another seer wasn't obscenely difficult. However, landing one with sight strong enough to find Tran, but not so strong to be a risk to his operations could be a finicky task. Plus, he'd only just gotten this one house-broken. He lay the back of his hand against the girl's bare arm: fever-hot and dry as a bone. Much longer, and her brain would be the consistency of overcooked oatmeal. She murmured through her daze, and he cocked an ear at her, before huffing out a humorless chuckle. His minion gave him a questioning look.

"She's reciting a hymn to Durga," Crowley said, earning a blank look from his lackey. "She's praying, moron," he explained, then paused. Praying - there was a thought. Crowley straightened and swept towards the door, casting instructions as he went, "Pack some ice around her, I want that fever brought down. Don't change the dose, not yet." He strode down the stairs to the lowest level of the building, where he kept his new toy. He smooth a slick smile on his face as he opened the metal door

"Settling in, are we?" he cocked his head at the angel tied to the heavy concrete chair. Samandriel blinked through the blood running from a gash in his forehead, scowling at Crowley over the filthy gag. The demon had let his heavies "soften" the angel up a bit, adding to the damage done during capture. Now the angel was essentially powerless, centered in an Enochian ward, the equivalent of a devil's trap the particulars of which had taken Crowley centuries to crack. The angel still had his strength, endurance, and immortality to fall back on, but Crowley could actually use that to his advantage. He crossed the room slowly, casually, as though he had all the time in the world. Summoning his customary glass of scotch, he settled on a stool across from the angel's stone seat, just within arm's reach. He began speaking, cheerfully holding conversation with himself.

"I suppose the boys upstairs briefed you before dropping you down here, so you must know everything about Prophets," he began, his tone light, "Slippery blighters â€“ seems even you cloud jockeys have trouble keeping tabs on them. Bit of a plot hole in that whole "Keepers of the Word" thing. Speaking of which..." he drew the demon tablet from an interior pocket in his coat and set it carelessly on the tray of instruments at his side. "Got it cheap in the end, for the low, low price of nothing," he smirked, watching the angel's

reaction closely.

Samandriel looked downcast at the sight of the stone in demon hands. His gaze moved from the tablet back to Crowley, and the faintest trace of anger stirred in his eyes. He still had some defiance in him. \_We can fix that,\_ Crowley thought.

"Not much good having the lock without the key, though," he continued. The angel looked marginally relieved.

"Course, there's lots of ways to hide down here," Crowley went on, "and lots of things to hide from. Even a few humans sticking their psychic noses where they don't belong." The angel's eyebrow twitched. "Witches astral projecting all over the place, mediums calling up spirits, even a few prats swanning about claiming to be seers of some kind..." Crowley shrugged, "that's a lot to look over your shoulder for." Samandriel snorted softly, and Crowley paused a moment before adding, "Then again, God seems to be pretty careless with His favorite tools" not surprising, He does tend to leave things laying around."

Samandriel snarled from behind the gag and Crowley removed it with a snap of his fingers. "You think God would make no protection for the Keepers of His Word?" the angel snapped, "That He would put lambs among wolves without a guard?"

"What guard, you and your friends?" Crowley laughed spitefully, "Clearly a great terror to the forces of evil, that."

"His shields are many," Samandriel countered, "no unclean magic can pierce them."

"Are you reciting Bible verses?" Crowley taunted, "Or are you making this dreck up yourself? There are plenty of natural mediums out there, though less than they claim."

"A Prophet's mind is proofed against any psychic intrusion," the angel stated with finality.

"Really?" Crowley pressed, "Then you'd be surprised to know that a seer has been tracking Kevin for the last month?"

Samandriel started. "That's impossible," he denied, "The Word of God itself would protect him."

"He doesn't have the Word of God, though, does he?" Crowley held up the stone, "I've got it right here."

"The tablet is only a means of conveyance," the angel said hotly, "The Word itself is already bound up with the Prophet's thoughts."

Crowley looked intrigued, "You mean what he's already interpreted?"

Samandriel fell silent, realizing how much he had said, and looked away.

"That's it, isn't it?" the demon continued, a growing smile on his lips, "The more he thinks about what he's read, the more he uses it,

the stronger his brain barrier gets." He sat back, satisfied; that explained why, despite every advantage, the seer had lost her hold. He clapped his hands to his knees abruptly, standing up and heading for the door. Speaking to the guards outside, he nodded back into the room, "Have at it." He walked away as the metal door cut off the sound of fist hitting flesh.

\* \* \*

><p>Devishi was dreaming of the sand-dunes at Kitty Hawk, only they had grown to cover everything from one side of the barrier island to the other. She stumbled over a piece of wood, and dug the offending object out of the sand â€“ it was from the sign for the state park. Devi felt like she had been walking for hours under the merciless sun, and had seen no-one, no sign of life. Even the scrubby oak forest on the fringe of the dunes had withered. She had a raging thirst, but she couldn't stop moving until she found... What had she been looking for? She couldn't remember anymore. She heard a rustle behind her, and turned to see a crow perching on a desiccated oak branch. It croaked out a raucous cackle at her, then flew further into the ruined trees. Without knowing why, Devi followed it.</p>

She turned over to find herself on her back, staring at the iron grid-work of the ceiling. She couldn't recall where she was or how she got there. The House of Elrond this ain't, she thought. Her body felt like someone had run over her with a truck, reversed over her again, parked on top of her as the driver asked for directions, then driven off with her stuck to the tire for several yards. She took a deep breath, feeling the air rasp against her chapped lips and dry throat. Water, she needed water. Raising her head slightly, she looked around the room, and saw a stocky figure silhouetted against the opaque windows; the figure was consulting a mobile phone. Devi started to speak, but the words stuck on her parched tongue and rattled in her throat, setting her coughing violently.

"So, you finally decided to wake up," a gravelly voice said, and Crowley stepped away from the window. He pushed a button to raise the head of the bed, considering her sternly.

"Please," she gasped, reaching for the pitcher of water on the table, just out of her reach. Pouring a glass, he held it out to her. She seized it and sucked the water down greedily, sputtering as her coughing stilled. When she lowered the cup, trying to catch her breath, she noticed the restraints attached to the bed, and the bruises on her wrists.

"What happened?" Devi whispered hoarsely. Her voice was strained to the point of being nearly inaudible.

"What happened?" Crowley echoed, "What happened is that you lost us the Prophet." His tone was terse and angry, "I gave you one task, and you couldn't deliver. So, tell me," he leaned forward, "what should I do with you?"

Devi ran her tongue over dry lips, "I, I didn't... I mean, I tried, but I-"

"But you what, dropped the call?" Crowley sneered, "We had him in hand, and you mucked up." The girl looked at him with wide eyes. "Then you had to go on a bender," he continued, "Do you realize how

much time you've cost us?"

"I'm sorry," Devi whispered.

"Sorry," Crowley snarled, "And what does that get us?" He turned from her, running a hand over his beard.

"Let me try again," the girl said. Crowley smirked to himself. Three-quarters dead, and she's ready to take another run at it, he thought. So well-trained. He was glad he'd chosen not to burn her out; the entertainment value alone was worth it. Schooling his features into a stormy expression, he turned back to her, putting his hands in his pockets.

"No," he replied coldly.

"But—"

"You had your chance, darling," he said, feigning skepticism, "I'm not one to throw good effort after bad." The girl drew her lower lip between her teeth; that was becoming his favorite tell of hers, a sure sign she was overthinking. "Very disappointing show, this. What would your parents say?" he spoke more coolly now, more controlled, "Shall we bring them here and ask them?"

"What do you want me to do?" she asked quietly. Ready to please, that's a good little whore, Crowley mused. He prolonged the silence until she was practically squirming.

"Luckily for you, I have dug up an alternative," he said finally, "If Kevin Tran is too much of a challenge, we'll just have to find another prophet."

"There are others?" the girl asked hopefully.

"Certainly," Crowley said agreeably, "for our purposes." He examined his nails carelessly. "It may take a few days to get some basic information on them," he continued, "In the meantime, you get your feet back under you."

The seer nodded, looking again at the bruises on her wrists. "You tied me down," she deduced.

"You were seizing, pet," Crowley shrugged, "It was for your own safety." She noticed that the IV drip bag contained a clear solution instead of the green potion.

"What's this?" she asked, gesturing to it.

"Saline, some other electrolytes, and a dose of physostigmine," he answered. Devi recognized the drug as an antidote for Datura poisoning. It was lucky atropine had a short half-life.

"I guess that explains why I feel like a wrung-out dishrag," Devi said, pulling at her shirt as it clung to her clammy skin. Her system would have tried to flush out the toxin any way possible, prodigious sweating included. "Hey, wait a sec! Who changed my clothes?" She had been wearing the red dress that night in the hotel, and was now back in a set of black scrubs. A sly smile crept over Crowley's face.

"Shy, darling?" he needled, and she shot him a dirty look. "Relax, your virtue's untarnished," he said, holding up his hands, "I'm a quick-change artist â€“ a snap of the fingers was all it took." The seer narrowed her eyes slightly, looking unconvinced. "As I told at the start of this" he continued smoothly, "it's strictly business between us." Devi wasn't entirely reassured; being in business with a demon didn't seem like a very secure situation.

## 12. Chapter 11: The Road More-or-Less

**\*\*Chapter 11: The Road More-Or-Less Traveled By\*\***

\*\*It is one of the blessings of this world that few people see visions and dream dreams.

>- Zora Neale Hurston<strong>\_

"Easy on there, pet," Crowley admonished, "You'll make yourself ill again." Devishi paused from shoveling oatmeal into her mouth to glare at him. Crowley had moved their work from his office to another, larger room. Devi supposed it was the library. There were book shelves on three walls, and fireplace occupying the whole of the fourth. The fireplace was open at the back, offering a glimpse of another room beyond, the features of which were hidden in the shadows. Before the fireplace was set a number of cushy wing-backed chairs with matching ottomans. A plush Persian rug carpeted the sitting area, abutting against a wide stone hearth level with the floor.

"I haven't had solid food since Cheyenne, and you sent me to bed without supper that last night," she argued, pointing at the demon with her spoon.

"A mild penalty considering your misbehavior," he replied coolly. Devi snorted to herself, returning to the more pressing matter of breakfast. She had been on a convalescence diet during her recovery, and chicken stock, juice, and Jello just didn't satisfy. At least she could stand and walk unassisted now. When she'd first tried to get out of bed, her legs had trembled under her like a newborn foal's. She sighed contentedly as she took a generous swallow of hot tea, strongly brewed with plenty of milk. Crowley looked over at her with an amused smirk on his face.

"What?" she asked defensively.

"Enjoying yourself?" he solicited.

"Your people have only been feeding me twice a day â€“ forgive me if I'm in famine mindset," she groused, "You might want to remind them that I get hungry as often as they do."

"Wouldn't do much good, darling," he shrugged, "Demons don't eat."

Devi frowned, bewildered, "But you drink all the time. You're doing it now." She pointed to the tumbler at his elbow.

"It's the little things that get me through the day," Crowley said, taking a sip and smacking his lips with relish.

"So, demons can eat or drink if they want, but they don't have to?" she said, connecting the dots.

Crowley turned to consider her closely, "Inquisitive little kitty, aren't you?"

The seer colored slightly. "Just trying to figure out the rules," she murmured, looking down.

"Why?" he pressed, drawing out the word with a mischievous gleam in his eye.

She met his gaze, and her expression hardened. "Because I like knowing precisely how screwed I am," she answered firmly.

He chuckled, regarding her with what, for him, passed for fondness. "Just remember: curiosity, cats, and all that," he said, and she dropped the subject.

After a moment, she took a different tack. "At the auction, when they were selling the hammer, that skinny, old guy was bidding," she began, "he was going to lose, but then he threw in roughly half a virgin, and won." She waited until Crowley issued an affirmative grunt before asking, "Why was that valuable?"

"There are a lot of creatures out there that consider fresh virgin a delicacy," Crowley replied distractedly, "badly-aging demigods included."

"Oh for the love of- Really?" Devi slammed her hands on the table, causing Crowley to glance up, eyebrows raised. "It's not enough that the whole human race is obsessed with who's-screwing-who," she went on, "now the monster mash is keeping tabs, too?" She was unpleasantly reminded of her grandmother nagging her about the value of "purity" in the marriage market.

The demon gave her a sly smirk, "Concerned for your safety, darling?" Devi scowled, but said nothing, letting him return to his task. She chose not to voice the next question swirling in her mind: whether demons were among the "creatures" Crowley was speaking of.

Devi glanced over the various paraphernalia strewn across the heavy oak table in front of her. Several large maps were half buried under piles of herbs, bowls of powders, a mortar and pestle, and several alchemy flasks, as well as a burner and stand. Crowley was brewing again.

"Is there any cinnamon?" she asked, "Or allspice, maybe?"

"What for?" Crowley responded, not looking up from his ingredients.

"For the oatmeal, of course," Devi said. Crowley rolled his eyes at her request. "Invade half the world for spices," she muttered, half to herself, "the least you could do is season your food..."

"If you're quite done," Crowley said shortly, "can we work?" The seer sighed, scraping out the last of her oatmeal before pushing her bowl away. She drew her bare feet up beneath her, taking up her mug of tea

and holding it in both hands. She was cold again.

"What do we have on these other prophets?" she asked, her tone conciliatory.

"A name," he replied carelessly, "Dennis Adams."

"And?" Devi pressed.

"That's all at the moment," Crowley said slowly, watching her response.

She looked disheartened, but then pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Well, the name might at least suggest something," she theorized, "What kind of person we're looking for, maybe even a broad location." Crowley raised an eyebrow, but she went on, "I mean, odds are Dennis is from Europe or North America."

"Thin," he said skeptically.

"It's something," she defended.

"Fortunately, we will have more to go on shortly," Crowley smirked, "once this location spell is finished."

Devi looked at him askance. "And you were keeping this to yourself and letting me freak out because...?" she said, annoyed.

"You seem determined to make this a team effort, dear," the demon smiled patronizingly, "I wanted you to feel involved."

"Oh, well, thanks for making me a part of this," she snapped, "Is there anything else I can do for you, or did you just need someone to be impressed by your hocus-pocus?"

Crowley cocked an eyebrow at her, pursing his lips. She was getting feisty again; apparently, feeding her had that effect. "You will take this," he slid her a glass of greenish yellow liquid, still steaming slightly. The seer was immediately leery.

"What is it?" she asked cautiously, holding up the glass.

"It's diviner's sage; it's used by shamans in South America to achieve an altered state of consciousness," Crowley explained. She looked uncertain. "Compared to what you've been on, this is tame," he reassured, "Drink it down, and go sit in front of the fireplace. Focus on the name."

Still dubious, the seer drank the brew, surprised at the relatively pleasant taste. She rose and crossed the library, taking a pillow from one of the chairs and placing it on the floor, then settled on it with her back against an ottoman. She crossed her legs in lotus position, figuring that if she was to take a stab at this, she might as well do it properly. She worked her hands into the sign for opening the third eye: middle fingers straight, touching at the tips; the others folded, back to back; and thumbs together, pointed back at her solar plexus. Devi wasn't sure if any of this was helping, if her sight was in any way connected to her body's position, but it couldn't hurt. Unbeknownst to her, Crowley was attentively watching the proceedings, which he found highly entertaining.

She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, staring into the flames as she tried to relax her mind. She had never been very good at meditation — she found it hard to keep her thoughts from wandering or jumping from one subject to another. Having the fire to watch seemed to alleviate that issue, at least partially. As the draught took effect, she felt a gradual disconnect from her body. It wasn't painful, but the sense of unreality reminded her unpleasantly of the sight potion. She was lightheaded, and her thoughts seemed to rush past her before she could fully grasp them.

"Relax," Crowley said above her suddenly, causing her to jump. She glared up at him. "You're trying too hard," he continued, "and I think you may find this helpful." He leaned down to place a smooth slab of stone in her lap.

"Is this... it? The tablet?" she asked, running her fingers over the incised lines.

"That's it," he confirmed, "That's our connection to the other prophets: the Word wants to be read."

"You think it'll, I don't know, call to the other prophets?" the seer inquired, continuing to examine the stone. "Like the One Ring to the Nazgul?"

"Sure, something like that," he said dismissively.

Yeah, pretend you don't understand that reference, she thought snidely, attempting to regain her concentration. She heard Crowley step back towards the table, and wondered if he even expected anything to come of this. He didn't seem too concerned with the results. Maybe I should just be glad to not be under the microscope anymore, she consoled herself, at least for now. She pressed her hand against the cool surface of the stone, feeling it take warmth from her skin. She had expected to sense something odd from the tablet, a tingling maybe, but there was nothing; for her, it was just a carved bit of rock.

Behind her, she could hear Crowley working at the table: rustling papers, the clink of glass, the sound of ingredients being shifted about. There was the hiss and flare of fire, the smell of burnt parchment, and the demon hummed in approval.

"Oklahoma," he said, "Aim for that." Devi murmured in agreement, choosing not to bring up the fact that she hadn't the vaguest idea how to "aim" her sight. She took another slow, even breath. The sense of being adrift was stronger now, along with a impression of being pushed or pulled gently. It was like laying in bed after a day spent in the ocean, still feeling the rise and fall of phantom waves. Comparing it to that pleasant experience made it easier to sink into sensations, letting her mind drift.

Sounds began to trickle in: mechanical squeaks, groans, and hisses, followed by the acceleration of a slow, heavy engine. The feeling of rising and falling coalesced into the gentle bump and jostle of large wheels on tired pavement. The funk peculiar to public transit hung about, and Devi saw a cityscape through a wide, smudged windscreen. The vehicle slowed and crept alongside the curb, crawling to an unsteady stop. The doors hissed open, and Devi's view shifted to

watch people troop up the steps. \_A bus, \_she realized, \_I'm on a city bus. \_The doors closed, and the bus lurched forward again.

Devi started looking for signs or writing, trying to get a fix on location. On the dashboard, there was picture of balding man standing next to a small barbecue grill with a grin on his face, his arm around a middle-aged blonde woman. There was a pair of boys in swim trunks chasing each other with water pistols through the background. As the bus approached the next stop, she strained "her" eyes to read the placard: #5453. As the doors opened, she noted the bus itself was green. Many of the people getting aboard were her age and carrying backpacks, suggesting they were students. One had on an "University of Tulsa" ball-cap. Pulling away, she saw a street-sign for E. Admiral Plaza.

Devi breathed deeply as she opened her eyes to find herself staring at the ceiling. She felt at ease, warm and relaxed, and some contrary part of her distrusted that. She straightened her back from where she had slumped against the ottoman, rubbing the back of her neck.

"Well?" Crowley spoke from one of the chairs. He was leaning back, elbows on the armrest, fingers steepled, looking at her with a supercilious air. Devi hadn't heard him come over.

"He's in Tulsa, I think," she said, brushing back a lock of hair from her face, "driving a bus near Admiral Plaza. He just left stop 5453." Crowley nodded briskly, then gestured to a man standing by the door whom Devi was sure hadn't been there before. The man left the room quickly, and Crowley looked back at her.

"Not a bad day's work," he said, "if a bit tedious."

"Tedium?" Devi asked with a frown, "How long was I out?"

"Just an hour or so," he replied, unconcerned.

"Damn it," she muttered. She felt a headache starting behind her eyes.

"Cheer up, darling, you did fine," Crowley waved a hand, "Told you that you'd get the hang of it. Now we just need to find a way to keep you in a seeing state without knocking you out completely," he continued airily, "Something more stimulating, maybe cocaine..."

"You're not turning me into some junkie guinea-pig," Devi said flatly. Potions and herbs were one thing, but street drugs were another matter entirely.

"Now's no time to dig your heels in, pet," he chided, "You volunteered for this, remember?"

"Being press-ganged is not the same as volunteering," she contested, "and I'm only doing this-"

"For the folks back home, yes, I know," the demon cut in, his voice taking an edge, "which is why you'll do whatever it takes to get results." Devi pressed her lips into a slim line, but didn't argue further. Crowley gave her an appraising look. "We're done for today,"

he said, snapping his fingers for a minion.

A tall, black man came in to escort her back to her room; he would have been attractive if it weren't for the sinister quirk of his mouth. "And remember to get her something to eat," Crowley added as his man left with the girl. It would slow things down if she kept passing out on him. That was likely what had happened in this instance — seer's sage usually didn't cause users to lose time. The girl wasn't back at one hundred percent, that much was clear, but he couldn't wait. Best to strike while the iron was hot. Speaking of which, he smiled to himself. It was time to pay another visit to the angel in the basement.

### 13. Chapter 12: Through a Mirror Darkly

\*\*Chapter 12: Through a Mirror Darkly\*\*

"The spiritual road runs both ways." - Mischa V. Alyea\*\*

"I don't like this!" Devishi hung back by the door, arms crossed over her chest. She appeared to be trying to fold in on herself.

"Your concern is duly noted," Crowley said, supremely unconcerned, "Now get over here."

They were in the drawing room on the other side of the fireplace: a dark, sensual, secretive sort of chamber, decorated entirely in black and red. Antique furniture set the background for the various exotic objets d'art scattered about the room: inlaid ebony tables, carved jade figures, embroidered cushions and wall-hangings. This looks like something out of a spy flick, Devi thought, as she walked over reluctantly and sat on a velveteen chaise lounge, This would be where the femme fatale and James Bond would have their flirty verbal chess-match.

Crowley stood next to the fire, hands in his pockets, ominously backlit; Devi could have sworn he was doing it on purpose, to be dramatic. He sauntered over to the chaise, reaching into his suit's breast pocket and pulling out a parchment packet. The demon placed a hand-sized bronze incense censer on the low table in front of her and opened the lid. Devi swallowed hard as he opened the packet, trying to keep her breathing steady.

"There's your old friend, diviners sage," the demon said, half to himself as he emptied about two tablespoons of dried leaves into the censer's bowl. "And, keeping in the shamanistic vein," he held up a single dried mushroom, "Teonanácatl: Aztec magic mushrooms — hard to get hold of after the Conquista, but there a few caverns in Guatemala that still have the proper subspecies." He dropped it in the censer before looking back to her. "Lie down," he commanded. Devi shot him a look of mingled consternation and confusion. "The smoke's heavy — you need to get your shnozz down in there to get a proper dose." She complied as if she was lying on broken glass.

"Heavens, darling, there's no need to get yourself in such a state!" Crowley exclaimed, "Don't tell me you haven't 'experimented' since you went to uni?"

"No," she said shortly.

"Come on," he teased, "It's part of the higher learning experience â€“ emphasis on 'higher.'" He grinned at his own joke, but could tell she hadn't relax an inch. "You'll have at least gotten a bit of 'green' in your time."

"I haven't," Devi snapped, and he snorted in derision. "I have not!" she protested, half-rising.

"My, but you've led a sheltered existence," he smirked.

"I've had the opportunity," she challenged, "I've chosen not to take it."

"Didn't want to upset Granny?" he taunted.

"I'm opposed the senseless slaughter of innocent neurons," Devi retorted, propping herself up on her elbows, "I'm rather fond of my brain; I don't go messing with its chemistry."

Crowley leaned back, giving a long, measuring look down his nose at her. "Is that what's got you so terrified?" he asked lowly, "The possibility of going all "Beautiful Mind," hm?" The demon knew that people who prided themselves on their intellect often harbored a phobia of losing it. He held up a hand against her objection, "Please, you're talking to the expert on fear and pain, pet," he narrowed his eyes, "I could smell it on you from across the room."

If he's trying to reassure me, he's doing a terrible job, Devi thought. Maybe he wanted her scared â€“ that did seem to be his primary mode of getting results. To her surprise, he crouched next to the lounge, reaching out a hand to cup her chin gently, his gaze intense but, to her at least, completely opaque. Then again, he does that fake sincerity thing pretty well, she realized.

"The thing about psychoactive drugs," he said slowly, "is that the subject's mindset affects the experience." Devi recognized the fact, not missing how the demon referred to her part. Subject: this is an experiment to him. I'm an experiment, she gathered. That was worth remembering.

"You go into this worked up," Crowley continued, "and neither of us will like the results." Devi nodded reluctantly, forcing her breathing to slow. "Honestly, you're worried over nothing," he concluded, "It's just a few grams, and it'll be out of your system in hours â€“ no lingering residue. Scout's honor." He stood up, and snapped his fingers; a small spurt of flame flickered briefly in the censer dish, followed by a slow, thick curl of smoke. Closing the lid with a gesture, he began walking away.

"Where are you going?" the girl's voice quavered slightly, her anxiety evident. Crowley turned back to her, fighting to keep the corner of his mouth from twisting up at the tiny hint of panic in the question. It was always gratifying when manipulation started bearing fruit. He had been slowly, artfully enforcing her sense of dependence on him for weeks.

"Got some work to do, 'for King and Country,' if you will," he said soothingly, "but I'll be on hand, darling, just on the other side of

the fireplace." He gestured towards the blaze. "Now, lie back and think of, well, in this case, New Mexico," he grinned, then peered at her from under his brow, "Find me Justin Hunt, and we'll go from there."

Crowley slid out the door, closing it softly behind him. "Keep an ear out," he instructed his man outside before returning to the library. Normally, Crowley would have preferred to keep watch on his pet projects himself, but things had been piling up on him. Contracts, soul intake, conversion rates, and a hundred other vectors needed minding. Not to mention, he had "persuaded" several names out of the angel, and wanted to at least start location spells for them. He puffed out a sigh as he sat down at his desk; even without the need to sleep, there just were not enough hours in the day.

\* \* \*

><p>Devi lay stretched out on her side in a literal and mental fog. The smoke from the censer swept around her, indifferently lit by the pierced-metal wall sconces. She had one arm up and behind her head, hand clutching the embroidered silk throw pillow. The other was reaching out in front of her toward the fire, her fingers wafting slowly through the whorls of smoke, dabbling in it like a child finger-painting. There was some secret in the gray shapes, she was certain. The fire popped and there was a synchronous burst of purple in the corner of her eye. The darkness in the room felt thick and heavy, like black velvet. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply and drawing in another lungful of ritual hallucinogenic.<p>

There was a murmur of voices from the room across the grate, and she looked through the shifting flames again. Crowley leaning over his desk, was issuing instructions to his secretary, who took them down on an e-tablet. Something was... off about his voice. It was deeper, more raw and ragged. She looked again; there was a haze around both demons, like a swarm of midges. Then the smell hit her.

It was a scent that shot straight to her hindbrain, delving into instinct and ringing alarm bells in her primitive mind. She remembered when she first encountered it, the concrete sense of wrongness, even before she found the source. It was the body of a raccoon at the the edge of a hayfield, possibly killed by a mower. It had been laying in the sun for days, and either the heat or scavengers had split the carcass open, releasing and emphasizing the cloying, sickly sweet decay of torn flesh and dried blood. The same scent, but much stronger threatened to choke her now. She leaned forward, coughing and gagging, her eyes stinging. When she blink them clear, the haze around the two figures parted, and she could barely breathe at what she saw.

The smaller figure looked as if someone had skinned a lizard, then stuffed the skin back on inside-out, but that was nothing compared to the other. It was at least five times the size of the first, its head the grinning skull of a wolf with all skin flayed off, four eyes gleaming red like fire through a veil of blood. The vaguely humanoid body seemed to have been constructed by a madman who had torn all the bones out of place and re-positioned them outside the muscle and sinew like demented jigsaw armor. There was more bone, or horn, than there should have been, sharp spikes sticking out at the joints, jagged edges catching and tearing the flesh. The hands and fingers were disproportionately long, ending in needle-sharp points.

Devi stared at the apparition, absolutely frozen in terror; she was convinced even her heart had stopped beating for fear of being heard by the thing across the fire. After an eternity, she caught a short, hiccuping breath, which she immediately wasted in a horrified scream. She shot out a hand, upsetting the table and knocking the censer to the ground with a clatter. The door opened and another nightmare appeared, its form a bloodied, jumbled wreck of boar and hyena. It came toward her, and Devi scrambled to get up, backing unthinkingly towards the hearth until she felt the cold marble underfoot and heat at her back.

"Stay back!" she screamed, one hand raised as if to ward off a blow. The creature at the door paused, confused, and she stole the chance to dart to one side, pressing herself against the far wall. It rounded the chaise trying to reach her, and she rushed for the door. The creature leapt the fallen table and caught her around the waist, driving the wind out of her. Sobbing in panic, she twisted in its grip, throwing herself to one side and dragging the creature off balance. It fell on top of her, and she kicked out desperately to push it off.

"What's going on here?" the great, raw voice roared, and the thing on her checked. Devi squirmed out from under it and drew herself back against the overturned table. She pulled herself into the smallest ball she could make, covering her face with trembling hands. She distantly heard the raw voice ordering everyone else out of the room, the sound of retreating footsteps and the door closing. She didn't dare look up. There was a long moment of quiet, before Crowley's voice, his normal voice, broke the silence.

"What happened?" he said, his tone perfectly calm, his volume low. Devi only choked out a sob, tears seeping through her fingers. Crowley tsked softly, crouching down in front of the petrified seer. "What did you see?" he pressed, sounding almost, almost, concerned. She shook her head, pressing further against the table as if she wanted to disappear into it. "Darling, look at me," she felt a gentle touch on the outside of her hand, and shied away like a startled animal. Large hands took hold of her wrists. "I said, look at me," the voice was firmer now. Devi pulled against the hands, eyes still tightly shut. "Chaudhuri!"

The shock of hearing her name, which she was half-convinced the demon had forgotten, snapped her head up, and she found herself staring wide-eyed into Crowley's now-familiar human face. His narrowed eyes scrutinized her intensely, and Devi wondered for a moment if he ever saw the things people were beneath their skin, if he saw her that way. She shuddered.

"Seems you fell a bit further down the rabbit-hole than anticipated," he said quietly, releasing her wrists. Devi dropped her head, squeezing her eyes shut again. Crowley rose slowly, running a finger over his bearded upper lip. "Well, no more shrooms for you," he concluded. The seer moaned hollowly, trying to get in the habit of breathing again.

"Can you stand?" he asked, and she made a shaky attempt to rise, before sinking back to the thick oriental carpet. Crowley tsked again, holding out a hand to her. She didn't take it. He frowned as the girl looked up at him. There was distrust in her eyes " that

had been present since she came into his keeping " and fear as well, more heightened and focused than it had been. What was that stirring in the back of her mind? Disgust, revulsion, maybe? Ah, no, he thought, surprised he hadn't recognized it immediately, that's hate. He watched it coalesce on her face before she stuffed it down the murky bottom of her consciousness; if everything else fell away, that would be her rock, her solid ground in the midst of the storm.

He sighed, put his hand on her shoulder, and snapped his fingers, putting her to sleep and transporting both of them to her cell in one go. Leaving her on the bed, he considered her still form. She had seen something in her trance, that was clear. Perhaps scratching away at the divide between the physical and spiritual in her mind had been unwise. Traveling in the spirit world could provide shortcuts for her sight, make her more drawn to powerful individuals, but there were other travelers on that road. In a warehouse full of demons, there was such a thing as seeing too much.

#### 14. Chapter 13: Lines in the Sand

\*\*Chapter 13: Lines in the Sand\*\*

" We are all ready to be savage in some cause. The difference between a good man and a bad one is the choice of the cause."  
>- William James<strong>

Over the next weeks, Crowley continued to direct the seer towards potential prophets. After the mishap with the mushroom, he had stuck to using a mixture of white and diviners' sage, dried and burned as incense (plus a pinch of cannabis, but what the girl didn't know wouldn't hurt her). He was pleased to find that he could keep her in a trance for hours this way, without her losing consciousness, which enabled him to give and receive information instantaneously. Six of the could-be prophets were already in hand. The few from outside the United States had been the most difficult to track down " they might never have found the Italian if the seer hadn't complained of hearing church bells by the dozen in her sleep.

The angel had been unusually reluctant to give up the last name. Crowley hoped that indicated Aaron Webber was especially propitious. He had been rather unimpressed with the look of his earlier catches. Crowley strolled into the drawing room to see his seer seated on an ottoman with her legs drawn up, arms around her knees, staring into the fire. The girl was close enough to the grate that her face was flushed from the heat, but her eyes were focused despite the drugged smoke wreathing around her, her concentration on the dancing flames. She didn't acknowledge him when he entered the room, but a slight tilt of her head suggested she'd heard him.

Crowley approached the seer from behind, setting a hand on her shoulder; she jumped only slightly at the touch. He leaned down to whisper the name in her ear, along with the general location: Kansas. She just nodded in response, leaning towards the fire with a determined look. Crowley's lip quirked as he turned to leave.  
Excellent work ethic, that one, he mused. If he had to guess, he would say the girl had somehow fixed finding the other prophets as her "finish line," a definite and doable goal to keep her attention on. Crowley had neither encouraged nor disillusioned her on this

note, though he found it amusing that she was playing mind games on herself to keep some sense of agency. Saves me the effort, \_he considered with satisfaction.

As he reached the door, he heard the seer behind him draw a sharp breath. He looked back to see her frowning at the fire, gnawing her lower lip. Crowley narrowed his eyes. "Problem?" he asked, the lightness in his tone sparse enough to reveal the edge in his voice.

"No," the seer replied shortly, as if annoyed by the interruption. She gave a little snort of irritation, set her mouth in a thin line, and redoubled her efforts, putting her feet on the floor and leaning forward, hands on her knees.

Crowley leaned against the doorjamb, hands in his pockets, gazing calculatingly at the girl. She was frustrated, but at what remained to be seen. She shifted restlessly on her seat, as though trying to get comfortable.

"Are you sure you got the right name?" she asked finally, exasperated.

"Please," Crowley snorted contemptuously in response, "Remember who you're talking to. I can be very persuasive."

Devishi threw her hands up, turning from the fire, "Then there must be two Aaron Webbers, and I've got the wrong one."

Crowley cocked his head, "Wrong one â€“ what makes you think so?"

She frowned, crossing her arms across her chest. "He can't be who you're looking for. He's... he's just a kid."

"So?" Crowley said, raising an eyebrow.

"He's in kindergarten," Devi pressed, emphasizing the last word.

"SO?" the demon repeated, mimicking her earnestness.

"How can he be a prophet?" Devi shook her head in disbelief.

"Age makes no difference, pet," Crowley said, waving a hand, "'The wind bloweth where it wills,' and all that..."

She frowned, hesitating, "You already have the six others. Do you really need him?"

The demon's gaze darkened. "Any one of these people might be the able to read the tablet," he answered tersely, "I'm not leaving it to chance. Now, where's the little tyke?"

Devi felt her hair stand on end at the greedy gleam in his eye. "I don't know â€“ his mom just dropped him off at a preschool."

Crowley narrowed his eyes as the girl delicately drew her teeth over her lower lip â€“ she was keeping something back. "What preschool?" he huffed, becoming impatient.

"I don't know, one with a raccoon on the sign," she replied snippily, and Crowley took a threatening step towards her, his face stormy. "Can't you just leave him alone?" she argued, shifting towards the back wall, "He's five â€“ what good could he possibly be to you?"

"For one, low price threshold," Crowley said nonchalantly, closing the distance, "I can buy his cooperation for a pack of Twix and some Legos."

Devi shook her head again, "He's just a little boy..."

"So's your second cousin," Crowley's voice turned cold, "What's his name, Gautam?"

Devi froze. Her cousin had given birth more than a year back. The boy had just started talking in words that made sense to anyone other than himself. Crowley peered at her from under his brow, his lips pursed in an icy smile. "Now, for his sake," he said smoothly, "I trust you'd be willing to take another stab at this."

"I can't tell where Aaron is," Devi repeated emphatically.

"Then. Find. Out!" Crowley bit out with a snarl, his expression hardening.

"No, I—" Devi was cut off as Crowley wrapped his large hand around her neck, pressing her against the wall and lifting her until her toes barely touched the floor.

"Do you \_want \_your cousin turned into an entree?" he growled in her face, "Or are you actually stoned enough to think you can dictate terms to me?"

"You don't understand," Devi choked, clutching at his arm, "Aaron doesn't know how to read..."

"A clear indictment against the American educational system," Crowley sneered.

"I can't read the signs!" she gasped. Crowley cocked his head, easing his grip a tiny bit. Devi drew a quick breath and continued, "When I see through him, I can't read street-signs, storefronts, anything to give a specific location. He's too young."

The demon looked sidelong at her, suspicious. "You take on the subject's level of literacy?" he said skeptically.

"It the only thing I can think of," Devi gulped, "Writing just looks like a bunch of lines to him, it doesn't hold together."

Crowley dropped her to the ground. She sat against the wall, coughing, her throat already bruising. She placed a hand tenderly over the injury as she looked up at Crowley. He was staring at the ceiling contemplatively, hands back in his pockets. Devi jumped when he spoke suddenly.

"When you found our Mexican friend," he asked, feigning indifference, "you could read the writing on the wall then, correct?"

"I, I think so," Devi said uncertainly. She couldn't quite recall; most of the signs in the Hispanic street market had been prices or placenames, which didn't translate.

"And the Italian job?" he pressed, and she nodded, remembering notices in the Metro station.

"The words weren't interpreted *per se*," she said, "They were still in Italian -- I just knew what they meant, somehow."

"Fascinating," Crowley murmured to himself, before looking down at her. He seemed vaguely surprised she was still on the floor. "This may prove fortuitous," he mused, "if you see writing as the subject does, then perhaps..." He trailed off, then snapped his attention back to her, as if he'd suddenly come to a conclusion. "Get up," he said shortly, before turning to pace back and forth before the fireplace, stroking his beard meditatively.

Devi watched him warily, pushing a hand against the wall to stand on shaky legs. Maybe he'll just forget about this one, she thought hopefully. "Since Aaron can't read, he couldn't--" she began.

"You saw him going to preschool, yes?" the demon interrupted, "Being dropped off by his mother?"

Devi nodded reluctantly. So much for that...

"Do you hear the mother's name?" Crowley pressed.

"At that age, I doubt he knows his parents have names, other than 'mom' and 'dad,'" she pointed out caustically.

"Mind your tone," the demon said, still half-distracted, "What about a teacher?" The girl swallowed, looking away, and Crowley stopped pacing, stalking towards her with slitted eyes. "Teacher's. Name. NOW," he growled, backing her against the wall.

"Mrs. Hagar," the seer said grudgingly, looking at his shoes.

He nodded sharply, ticking off items in his mind. Aaron Webber, Kansas, preschool with a raccoon mascot, Hagar... It would take some leg-work, but it was enough. He looked back down at the seer. She was becoming restive, rebellious. It was time for an object lesson.

\* \* \*

><p>"What do you want?!" the angel panted, echoes of his long, anguished scream still ringing. "I've given you all the names," he added desperately.</p>

"No. No. No. And no," Crowley replied, waving the angel blade in front of the bloodied boy, "That's not what I wanna hear." He twirled the gleaming blade around his fingers like a drumstick before sinking the point into Samandriel's shoulder, drawing another scream. "This hurts you more than it hurts me, so I can go on forever," he continued, "Which in your case, forever means, well, forever."

"When the angels find out what you're doing..." Samandriel began.

"They'll be what, put out? I'm quaking, really," Crowley brushed the angel's words aside contemptuously. "The power grid is so whacked out in Heaven, they don't even know you're not there," he went on, "So, on the count of three: one, two..." He jammed the blade back in, then wrenched it out sharply.

"What happened to three?" gasped Samandriel.

"I lied," the demon replied carelessly, "I do that. Just give me the other names."

"There are no other names," the angel insisted, "The next generation isn't born yet."

Crowley leaned down, scrutinizing his captive's face. "Truth?" he pressed.

"Truth," Samandriel responded wearily.

"Well," the demon mused, "I suppose there's no reason to keep torturing you then." Samandriel exhaled heavily and sank back in the concrete chair, sagging against the bindings. He was completely unprepared when Crowley rammed the blade into his shoulder a final time. "Sorry," Crowley chuckled, tossing the blade onto a tray of implements "Once you get going, it's really hard to stop." He doffed his apron, handing it off to the guard at the door in exchange for his overcoat, which he draped over one arm. "Keep him on ice," he instructed his lieutenant, "We've only just scratched the surface with this one." He cast a last look of anticipatory glee at the battered angel before leaving the room.

Outside, another of his demons, the tall black man, had a firm hand on the seer's shoulder. Her normally sepia-toned skin was paled to a sickly yellow, and her jaw was clenched against nausea. Crowley could see her trembling fitfully, her dark eyes were wide. That's more like it, he thought, grinning as he approached her. He expected she would be much more tractable now.

"Well, darling, it looks like our international Easter egg hunt is finally concluded," Crowley said, chucking her under the chin. She stared numbly past him, eyes fixed on the door he'd just come through, her whole body tense and ready to bolt. "Sorry to have brought you down here for nothing, but never mind," he smirked, "I have another little game in mind for you." He nodded to the demon holding her, and turned down the hall, his minion following with the seer.

Crowley led them to what Devi had come to think of as her "recovery room," where she had shaken off the first dose of the potion, and weathered an overdose of the same weeks later. The hospital bed had been removed, and in its place was a reclining examination chair, such as those found at a dentist's office. The monitors, IV stand, and other accouterments were clustered around it. Devi hesitated in the doorway, but her guard shoved her through and pushed her towards the chair. She settled into it, on pins and needles, her whole posture bleeding anxious uncertainty. Crowley came alongside and produced a drip-bag, half full of mottled, greenish sludge.

"Oh no," Devi moaned.

"Oh yes," he grinned viciously, handing the bag off to a lackey.

"But I found them all!" she protested, leaning forward. Her guard clapped a hand to her shoulder, pushing her back into the chair.

"Yes, you did, and they're all in there," Crowley gestured to the bag, "A tether for each one of our maybe-prophets."

"You want me to see through all of them, at the same time?" Devi's jaw dropped, "Are you insane?" She made another futile attempt to rise out of the chair, but Crowley's associate held her back again. Having moved to stand behind the chair, he grabbed both her arms, just above the elbow, and held them against the arms of the chair.

Crowley stepped forward holding the needle of the IV feed, smirking down at her. "Not at all," he said cavalierly, "Your job is to find out which of those loons is the real McCoy." He slid the needle into her arm, opening the gauge, and Devi gasped at the acrid burn of the potion flooding her veins. Crowley braced himself against the arms of the chair, bringing his face close to hers. "Whichever of those also-rans ends up being our man, I want you in their head," he continued, "And see if you can make anything out of the tablet."

"You said only a prophet can read the tablet," Devi vied.

"Correct," replied Crowley holding up a finger, "unless a certain psychic interloper reads it through them."

"So, you want me to use them as a sort of lens? Will that even work?" she countered.

The demon shrugged, "Don't know 'e only one way to find out." He patted her cheek roughly before sweeping out of the room. Devi lay back in the chair with a groan; these experiments of his never seemed to turn out well for her.

Her mind was dragged into a much larger room nearby, her senses kaleidoscoping as she tried to take in multiple perspectives. A wave of vertigo swamped her as she saw and heard from seven places at once, all reckoning of space and balance completely off-kilter. Head spinning, Devi tried to narrow her focus to just one or two of the people gathered, but each time she settled on one, her attention was jerked away to another. Simultaneously, there was barrage of foreign emotion, mostly varying flavors of trepidation. The feelings were similar enough that she found that homing in on them, rather than the flood of sensory data, gave her some semblance of a coherent picture to hold onto. All the same, it was like trying to visualize smell.

She watched Crowley stroll in, smiling to himself. A curly-haired boy smeared in paint ran and hid behind some discarded equipment as he passed. "I hope the ruckus down the hall wasn't too off-putting," he began casually, laying the demon tablet on an octagonal glass table in the center of the room, "Construction standards aren't what they were during the Inquisition." He was greeted by wary silence from all

six people seated around the table. "I see, no niceties," he continued, "I suppose you're all wondering why I convened this motley group."

Justin, a mustachioed man with graying hair in a postal worker's uniform pipped up, "Are we on a spaceship?"

"Sorry," the demon cocked his head, sure he had heard wrong.

"Snapping us up from our homes, our families," Krista, a middle-aged woman with frizzy hair added, "Teleporting us up to this mothership..."

"Mothership?" Crowley asked, incredulous.

"You're aliens, right?" Justin said.

Crowley narrowed his eyes, checking to see if the man was pulling his leg. "Possibly a long shot," he held up the tablet, "does this mean anything to you?"

Justin adjusted his glasses, squinted at the squiggles on the stone, then sat back shaking his head, "I don't read Chinese."

"Talk about the dumbing down of America," Crowley muttered, turning to the others around the table. "Anyone, come on, it's fun," he pressed, "Give it a go." Blank stares were all he received. "You hapless toads are utterly clueless, aren't you?" he said finally.

At this point, the bus-driver to his left, Dennis stood up. "I got a wife, and kids; I got bills to pay," he protested, "I can't miss work."

"Sir," Crowley began calmly.

"I got rights!" Dennis exclaimed, putting his hands on his hips, "Where's my one phone-call?"

Crowley held up a hand, and the man abruptly began choking up blood, to the shock of everyone else around the table. Devi struggled to rip herself out of his mind. She could feel his organs revolting from their natural place, spasming convulsively. Still retching blood, Dennis stumbled against the wall, slid down, and lay still. Devi gasped for air herself as the man's shredded lungs quivered feebly in his last breath.

She opened her eyes, her own physical sight playing over the visions still coming in from the other prophets, and started to struggle out of the chair. Her guards held her back.

"What's happening?" one asked the other, "What do we do?"

"I don't know, increase the dose?" the second guessed, turning up the gauge on the drip with one hand as he restrained her with his other.

"No, don't!" Devi protested, before her mind was thrust back to the prophets. There was a heightened note of terror in the room. Aaron was listening from a far corner, having tucked himself behind an old

winch and covered his eyes. Devi would have liked to join him, but her focus kept being drawn back to the table, where the majority of the prophets were staring at Dennis' body in horror. Their disturbed emotional states compromised the weak anchor on reality she'd crafted, exposing her to overwhelming amounts of sensory input.

She caught glimpses of Crowley looking around the table with a cold smile, eyes gleaming, "Anyone else want to complain?"

Krista rose from her seat and picked up the tablet. "Um, we hold this... um, maybe 'these' truths to be..." she began uncertainly. Crowley, with an expression of disdain, coolly reached out and rotated the tablet ninety degrees. "Oh, oh yeah," Krista said, just as befuddled as before, "That's, that's better, yeah..." Devi could tell Krista was trying to sense something from the tablet, some instinct or inkling to what it might mean, but as far as the seer could tell, the housewife was only fooling herself.

Crowley clearly thought so. He snapped the tablet out of Krista's hands, walking around the table and showing the tablet to each of his captives in turn. Devi tried to keep up with him, but her mind was still being yanked from one point of view to another. Her increasing disequilibrium was compounded by a growing pain behind her eyes, like someone was casually digging at her optic nerve with an ice pick.

As Crowley approached Maria, Devi was swept up in a wave of revulsion from the woman, feeling her hand clench around the comforting firmness of rosary beads. Devi had only rarely been able "hear" a subject's thoughts, but Maria's mind was practically screaming a blur of Aves, Madres, and Pater Nosters. She knows, Devi realized, She knows something's off about him. When Crowley came to her, Maria backed away shaking her head. As the demon moved past, the edge of his overcoat brushed against Maria's skirt, and her sudden surge of abhorrence twisted Devi's gut.

It was too much: over-stimulation of her senses, the physical toll of the potion, the grinding terror of her subjects, and now Maria's vivid reaction. Devi scrambled to the edge of the chair, pulling out the needle and shoving against the startled guard. She fell to her knees and promptly retched, bile rushing up her throat. The demons watching her stepped back with exclamations of disgust. Devi coughed up the last dregs from her stomach, tears rolling down her face. She drew a shaky breath, then another, crouching in trembling legs. Her guards shifted behind her, uncertain of what to do. One finally moved to put her back in the chair. Devi twisted her arm out of his grip, and rushed to lean over the sink. Standing so suddenly had brought on another bout of nausea. She squeezed her eyes shut against the pounding in her head.

"Well, that went well," Crowley's caustic voice grated on her ears from outside the tiny washroom. She looked up at the cracked mirror to see him standing in the middle of the room, legs a little apart, hands in pockets, chin up, with an imperious look on his face. Yertle the Turtle, ruler of all that he sees, she thought bitterly, slumping against the porcelain. Crowley took in the room at a glance before demanding an explanation from his dithering lackeys. The lower demons muddled out enough to demonstrate that they were in the dark, and Crowley turned his back on them to proceed to the washroom. Devi watched his approach in the mirror. He leaned against the doorjamb, meeting her eyes in the reflection, saying nothing. After a moment,

Devi looked away, her shoulders hunched and tense as she waited for his ire to break.

"Rough day at the office, sweetheart?" Crowley inquired tartly.

"It's too many, too much in my head," Devi answered. It surprised her how hoarse her voice was. "Even if was just physical sensations, I couldn't hold it all," she went on. "Throw in emotions, thoughts, memories, images..."

"That the reason for the mess in there?" the demon put to her.

She nodded, feeling oddly ashamed at her reaction. It felt too much like losing control. "I was in his head," she said softly. Crowley leaned his head to one side, and Devi looked up again at his reflection, her eyes accusing, "The man you killed â€“ I was in his head when he died."

Crowley grimaced, pinching the bridge of his nose. "An unfortunate bit of drama," he said unapologetically, "Roomful of potential psychic powerhouses, one has to keep a firm hand on the reins. He shrugged, "However, I doubt that lot in there have anything to offer, unless you're a tabloid publisher. Aliens, bah!" He regarded her closely, "You didn't see anything to suggest otherwise?"

Devi shook her head wearily, pressing her fingertips against her aching eyes. "None of them could make heads or tails of the tablet," she answered, resting her elbows on the sink, "They're just scared, confused people."

"Right, well, that makes them as much use as shipping coal to Newcastle," the demon snorted dismissively. Devi raised an eyebrow at him, not quite understanding the idiom. Crowley looked back at her, studying her features as if trying to make up his mind. Coming to a conclusion, he rounded on his underlings. "Food, rest," he clipped out, pointing to the seer, "and send someone to clean up that floor." The taller demon quickly volunteered himself to take Devi back to her room, leaving his counterpart scowling as he fetched a mop.

## 15. Chapter 14: Blurring the Lines

\*\*Chapter 14: Blurring the Lines\*\*

"\_\*\*For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth; to know the worst and provide for it." - Patrick Henry\*\*\_

Devishi would have gladly slept for another twelve hours, lumpy mattress be damned. Unfortunately, the King of Hell wasn't in a lenient mood. His experiment with the prophets-in-waiting had been a bust, making him all the more motivated to find his original target: Kevin Tran. A pair of demons came to fetch her from the cell, dragging her bodily from the bed. Devi had long since given up attempting to ask any questions of them; they never even acknowledged when she spoke. They shoved her into the same room as before, but she froze in the doorway when she saw the chair â€“ there were now thick leather straps fixed to the points on the arms and foot of it. Devi dug her heels in, leaning back against the escorting demons.

"No, no way," she attempted to back out of the room, but the demons blocked the door, seizing her arms, and began dragging her toward the chair. She fought them for every step, protesting loudly, but even as mere men, they would have been stronger than her; demonic, she might as well try to hold back the tide. They eventually opted to lift her bodily from the floor and carry her struggling form across the room, dropping her in the chair. Devi flailed desperately, "Get off of me!" There were only two of them, and they couldn't easily hold her in place and strap her down at the same time.

The larger one with a shaved head got fed up first. "Stop fighting, bitch!" he cursed, back-handing Devi across the face, splitting her lip.

"Here!" a gruff voice rang out, and Crowley walked into room, his face stern, "What's this then?" He glanced at Devi, noting her bloodied mouth and panicked expression with no particular concern, "Easy, pet, you might pull something."

"Don't do this," she pleaded, still trying to pull out of the lesser demons' grip.

Crowley graced her with a patronizing smile, "Relax, darling, there's no need to pitch a fit. All this," he gestured at the restraints, "it's for your own good." Devi stared at him incredulously. "We haven't given you quite as... concentrated a dose as this for some time," he explained, passing an IV bag full of a familiar green solution to his underling, "It's not clear what effect it may have on you." He tucked a knuckle under her chin, drawing a gray silk handkerchief from his breast coat-pocket and dabbing at the blood on her lip with an ingratiating smirk, "This is just a precaution, for your safety, of course." Devi didn't trust his word any further than she could spit, but the conversation had distracted her long enough for his minions to strap her down. One of them threaded the IV and jabbed the needle in her arm. As he did so, Devi could have sworn she saw out of the corner of her eye Crowley bring the bloodied handkerchief to his own lips, the tip of his tongue darting out against the crimson blotch, before considering the cloth thoughtfully.

Devi's eyes rolled back in her head as the drug took affect. Her sight latched onto Kevin with almost alarming speed; after several weeks searching for the other prophets, once again having a magical tether to her target made centering her vision easy. Kevin was in what looked like an abandoned diner, spreading a thick line of salt on a windowsill. As Devi lit down on his mind, he quickly glanced around, eyes narrowed. Seeing no-one, he gave an exasperated huff before heading to a walk-in pantry. Salting the one window in there, he started drawing sigils on the glass pane with a fat, red Sharpie. He again looked around himself, even leaning out of the doorway to check on his mother. Seeing she hadn't moved from her place at the counter, he returned to his task, but Devi could feel a growing sense of aggravation and apprehension. Suddenly, he threw down his marker, shut the pantry door, and turned back to the empty room.

"Alright, who are you?" he demanded. Devi's mind froze â€“ he couldn't be talking to her. She wasn't even there really, except as a shadow in his mind, a ghost. "I know you're there," he stated flatly, "I can feel you.\_" Devi could almost feel his thought shift under

her, as if she was riding a whale that had suddenly noticed her on its back. His inner eye turned to face her, and she fought back panic as the sense of something pressing on her suddenly manifested.

\_Stop\_, she thought. The pressure increased, like a vice on her brain. \_Stop, you're hurting me, \_she thought "louder," and the pressure lessened slightly, \_How did you find me? \_

His words broke over her like a wave, "Who are you? Are you a demon? Are you working for them?"

Devi was startled by this turn of events, but it seemed best to respond: \_No, no I'm not one of them. \_

He wasn't reassured, "Why are you spying on me, then?"

\_No, I wasn't...\_

"Watching me? Trying to find out where I am?! Give me break!" his thoughts became heavy again, as if trying to force her out.

Devi clung to them in an effort to keep herself grounded in his mind. \_You don't understand... \_

"Enlighten me, then," the Prophet snapped.

\_I have to\_ \_

"Let me guess, you do what he says or he kills someone you care about," Devi didn't answer. Kevin shook his head, "What makes you think he hasn't already?" There was no question between them of who "he" was; only one person could brought her here.

\_What? \_

"Or stuffed a demon in them..."

\_No, that's not right\_, she protested, \_He said...\_

"Have you seen them?" his question dropped through her thoughts like a stone. He pressed on, "How long has it been?"

Devi's anger surged, carried on an undercurrent of fear, \_No, you're wrong! They can't be, I... he promised... \_

She felt a bloom of sorrow in Kevin as he said, almost gently, "And he always keeps his promises, right?"

\* \* \*

><p>The girl in the chair tugged against her restraints, turning her head first one way, then the other. "Stop, you're hurting me," she moaned in her sleep, seeming to respond to an absent speaker. "How did you find me?... No... no, I'm not one of them..." The assisting demons looked to their leader, who was just as perplexed by the disjointed ramblings as they were. "No, I wasn't... you don't understand... I have to..." the bizarre one-sided conversation continued, "What?... no, that's not right, he said..." She struggled again in her bonds, fighting to sit up, "No, you're wrong! They can't

be, I... he promised..." Her voice trailed off, small and sad, "What do I do... I don't know where... They're looking for you..."<p>

"Wake her up," Crowley ordered, "Now." His voice was terse, and his flunkies scrambled to obey, one grabbing a syringe of adrenaline and jabbing it into the IV feed. Devi came awake gasping, her heart beating like a trip-hammer, emphasizing the pounding in her head. She felt the over-whelming urge to move, but bound to the chair, she could only shiver spasmodically as her muscles attempted to work the stimulant out. Crowley seized a fistful of her hair, jerking her head back. "What happened?" he growled, his face inches from hers.

"I don't know! It's never happened before!" she protested, "He... he somehow knew I was there, he started talking to me-"

"I heard," Crowley roared, "What did you tell him?!"

"Nothing, I swear!," Devi avowed desperately, "No more than you heard." Crowley released her with a savage snarl. He dragged a hand over his face, coming to rest on his beard, stroking it in thought. "Alright," he said, finally reaching a conclusion, "The Prophet already knew we were looking for him â€“ nothing's changed on that note." He turned back to his underlings, who were cringing in anticipation of his fury. "Unhook her from the feed," Crowley gestured to the IV, "We can't set her on him until we figure the nature of this... connection between them." The other demons did as he said, one drawing out the needle as the other unbuckled the restraints.

The girl seemed oddly subdued, remaining seated, hands limp in her lap and eyes downcast. Crowley nodded to the door, watched his minions scurry out, then turned back to her. "It's very fortunate for you that you didn't let slip any valuable information," he began, "Not that you know any, of course. Still, I'm sure you realize what such an indiscretion might cost..." He was taken aback when Devi let out a short, bitter laugh, tinged with hysteria.

"My family," she said, looking up at him with fierce despair, "Are they even still alive?"

"What are you on about? Of course they are," he gestured dismissively, "Why wouldn't they be?"

She dragged herself out of the chair and walked slowly towards him, eyes burning. "And I'm just supposed to take you word for it, am I?" she hissed.

Crowley stared at her, stunned for a moment before recovering his urbane front. "I keep my agreements, darling," he said firmly, "As long as you hold up your end, I've no reason to harm them."

Devi let out another manic laugh, "Like you need a reason, Rakshasa."

Crowley knew an insult when he heard it. He narrowed his eyes and stepped towards her, "You watch your tone, girl."

"Or what?" she challenged, baring her teeth in a savage grin, "You'll kill me?"

G\_irl's gone off her gourd, Crowley thought, \_Or else that adrenaline-high has turned her kamikazi. \_He attempted to regain control, "Enough. Once you calm down, I want you as surveillance on the prophets-in-waiting, in case any of them start feeling the magic—"

"No." Crowley worked his jaw, enraged. "I'm done seeing for you," Devi declared in a tone of finality.

"The hell you are," he growled, seizing her collar, "You'll do as you'll told, you snot-nosed little bint or your brothers will die screaming!" A flicker of doubt appeared in her eyes; she was willing to hazard herself, but she was far less careless with the lives of those she loved. Humans were so easy to manipulate. "I'll peel the skin off them, one by one, starting with the youngest," he added viciously.

"No! Leave them alone!" her eyes were fearful now, her defiance fading.

"And you'll watch the whole thing," he finished softly, "You sure you want to risk that, on a guess from a stranger?"

"No," she whispered, dropping her gaze.

"I thought not," Crowley sneered, releasing her, "Makes no difference to me, darling, but I thought you were smarter than that." She looked away, gnawing the split in her lip, conflicted. He pressed his advantage, smiling grimly, "You know, I think to avoid this sort of misunderstanding, I might have some of your delightful relations brought here." He turned away and started towards the door, "We could at least bring your mother in; I'm sure my lads would enjoy the company..."

Devi leapt at him, fist balled at her side — she wasn't sure what she intended to do, but every instinct screamed at her to do \_something\_. Before she reached him, before she even got close, the demon flicked his hand toward her, and an irresistible force shoved her backwards against a heavy metal table, pressing her down on its surface. She gasped at the initial impact and struggled to catch her breath against the sense of weight on her chest. It was as though gravity had doubled on her; she could barely lift her head. From the corner of her eye, she saw Crowley stroll nonchalantly towards her, hands in his pockets and an unreadable look on his face, radiating a lethal calm.

"You seem to have developed a deeply flawed understanding of our working relationship," he said, choosing his words deliberately, "I don't know how you could have come to this conclusion, but I intend to demonstrate quite clearly the exact nature of your place with me." He drew something from his coat pocket as he reached the table, and Devi recognized the pocket knife she'd carried at work. "Tough neighborhood, that coffeehouse?" he queried, holding it up.

"It's for opening boxes," Devi retorted.

Crowley flicked the blade out, examining it with a critical eye, "Could stand to be sharpened..." He snapped his fingers, and a Bunsen burner appeared on the table next to her head. Crowley turned on the

flame, opening it to clear blue and held the blade in the fire, watching the steel blacken. He looked down at the girl pinned to the table, grinning wickedly, "But I suppose it'll have to do."

## 16. Chapter 15: Last Resort

### \*\*Chapter 15: Last Resort\*\*

"\_\*\*I assess the power of a will by how much resistance, pain, torture it endures and knows how to turn to its advantage." - Friedrich Nietzsche\*\*\_

Crowley wasn't enjoying the session as much as he'd anticipated. He'd started simply enough, trailing the edge of the hot blade in long, parallel lines across the girl's arms. She was trembling by the time he moved to top of her legs, slicing through the scrubs' cotton fabric to give her thighs the same treatment. Now, after nearly twenty minutes, she seemed to be responding to the pain more on instinct than anything else, letting out only an occasional whimper. She wasn't even pleading properly anymore. Perhaps it was a side-effect of the solution, or lingering adrenal exhaustion, but regardless, Crowley typically preferred his "subjects" more lucid.

He was cutting a vertical slit through the lower half of her shirt, pushing her camisole up to reveal the soft skin of her stomach, when the girl tensed suddenly. Crowley paused, puzzled â€“ the belly was a sensitive area, but he hadn't really touched it yet. Maybe she was ticklish. The thought brought a quirk to his lips; that might be fertile ground to explore. He returned to the matter at hand, reheating the knife until the edge took on that cherry red indicating it was hot enough to sear the surrounding skin without fully cauterizing the cut. The scent of burning blood wound around him in a wisp of smoke, and he inhaled deeply. He ran the knife lightly through the skin of her abdomen, following the line of the tensed muscle, so caught up in the aesthetics of it that he almost missed her choked gasps. He glanced up at her sweat-streaked face, savoring the agonized twist of her features.

"There you are," he murmured, looming over her, "I was worried you were falling asleep on me." She turned her face to the side, pulling feebly against the force holding her down. As Crowley leaned back, admiring his work and considering his next move, he carelessly rested a hand on the girl's stomach; she squirmed. He glanced down at his hand, then back to her face â€“ she looked anxious: wide eyes fixed on him, mouth set in a thin line, forehead crinkled. Crowley narrowed his eyes speculatively, a theory forming in his mind. He slid his hand down ever-so slightly to her hip, running his thumb along the ridge of bone, and she again struggled against her magical bonds. That's what has her fluffed, he thought. "What's the matter, darling," he purred, bring his face near hers, "getting too close for comfort?"

"Don't pretend you're interested!" she snarled at him.

He smiled sinfully, reaching up with his other hand to catch her chin between his thumb and forefinger, "Oh, you have no idea what interests me, sweetheart." She snapped her teeth at his fingers. Bless, Crowley thought; she hadn't been this lively since he

started. His response was to hold the flat of still-hot blade against her side, leaving a thick red weal and wringing a ragged cry from her. "But I'd love to show you," he sneered, digging his fingers into the blistered skin.

The seer dropped her head back on the table, her eyes squeezed shut against the tears leaking from the corners. "Augh! Fine! Do what you want," she gritted out, "you can only kill me once."

Crowley laughed outright, throwing his head back, "Pet, you have a severe lack of imagination." He wrapped his spare hand around her throat and tightened his grip briefly, before turning her head almost tenderly to the side. "Now, hold still," he soothed, bringing the blade's edge to her cheek, just below her eye "and let daddy work."

At that moment the door opened, and a young man in a dark suit hurried in. "Sir, we've been contacted by a... oh," the underling seemed at a loss, staring at the tableau in front of him. His boss was leaning over a metal table, bloody knife in hand and a battered girl struggling under him, which, in fairness, wasn't unusual. However, the King was notoriously persnickety about being interrupted during "intensive questioning," and the minion was suddenly in fear of being forcibly parted from a significant portion of his skin. Crowley set his jaw, huffed an annoyed sigh, and stepped back from the table, regarding his subordinate with piqued indignation.

"What is it?" he snapped.

The inferior swallowed hard, "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't realize you were... occupied. We've been contacted by someone who claims to have access to the Trans." Crowley rapidly closed the distance to the younger man.

"This better not be a joke," he growled.

"No, sir, I don't think so, I mean no, it's... She was rather insistent," the adjutant stammered, "She wanted to speak with you about, um, payment."

The King leaned back on his heels, considering the news a moment before issuing clipped pronouncement, "Fine, I'll take the call in my office." Glancing back at his still-pinioned victim, he snapped his fingers, severing the force that held her there. She slid off the table slowly, curling into a heap as she touched the floor. "Lock her up," Crowley turned back to his aide, "I'll finish with her later." The younger demon hurried over the pitiful bundle of humanity, grabbing her arms in spite of her moans of pain. He lifted her to her feet, then half-dragged, half-carried her out of the room.

\* \* \*

><p>Devishi drifted in and out of a fevered daze, her mind escaping her wracked body by wandering the boundary between dream and vision. Images from other eyes twisted into nightmarish form, set to distorted sounds from other ears. Everything was too raw. Her brain was overflowing. The Prophet, she had to find him, warn him, tell him to run.</p>

\_What good will that do?\_ a viciously contrary part of her mind

pointed out, \_Kevin already knows he's being hunted. \_Kevin didn't know about her, though, what she could do, what Crowley might make her do. She didn't want to tell the demon anything, but she wasn't sure she'd be able to stop herself. Between threatening her family and what he'd just done to her...

\_Oh, right, because you've been so tight-lipped and stoic up 'til now, \_the contrary part of her mind fired back. It was right. She'd been cooperating with Crowley all along, had helped him find all those other people. She told herself it had been to protect her family.

\_And are they? Has anything you've done actually made them safe?\_ Not really: the more she'd given Crowley, the more he'd required. Now, she had no proof her family were okay, and more people were involved, people she'd put right in Crowley's hands.

\_So, what are you going to do?\_ That was an excellent question. She doubted Crowley would let things lie for long. Devi drew in a deep breath. \_Think,\_ she told herself. As long as other prophets couldn't read the stone, Crowley needed Kevin; as long as he didn't get Kevin, he'd still need her. \_My family has at least got to be alive for him to have leverage on me, \_she thought, \_as long as I'm necessary, anyway. \_She sighed, hating the inevitable conclusion: the best, the only thing she could do was to delay Crowley finding the Prophet as long as possible, whatever the consequences.

Sleep. She needed to sleep, while she could. She shifted on the cold floor, trying to find a few square inches of her body that didn't hurt to lie on. The demon underling had just dumped her inside the door, and she didn't have the strength to drag herself to the bed. Curling in on herself, she clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering. Now that she was out of the room, the shock of what had happened hit her fully, causing her to shiver violently. She focused on her breathing, using it to mark the time and distract herself from the pain. By this means, she was able to lull herself into an uneasy doze.

This was abruptly shattered when a trio of demonic heavies trooped into her cell. They hauled her roughly off the floor, their harsh grip reopening the half-closed wounds on her arms.

"I suppose I should be honored," she snarled at them, "He sent three of you this time â€“ I must have gone up in his estimation." \_Oh, good idea, antagonize them, \_the contrarian in her head was back, but Devi figured she might as well start being defiant while her meager courage lasted. The demons merely sneered, hustling her towards the room with the chair. Devi set her jaw, trying to steel her will. Let Crowley bluster, threaten, or do whatever he wanted to her, she wouldn't tell him what she saw this time.

Entering the room, the demons all but threw her into the chair, two holding her down while the other fastened her in. They drew the straps tighter than before, cutting off her circulation. Crowley appeared in the doorway, looking very much like the cat that got the cream. Devi glared at him.

"Feeling a bit more obliging now, pet?" Crowley strolled over, all-knowing smirk in place.

"Sure, I always feel especially helpful towards people who try to dismember me," Devi snapped. Crowley chuckled at her attempt to present a strong front, gesturing to his men to start the IV drip. "You can make me see," Devi growled at him, "But you can't make me tell."

"Can't I?" Crowley grinned fiendishly. "In addition to your usual acid trip," he continued, "I've cooked up a little something special." The demon king pulled a glass vial like a small test tube from his breast pocket; it was filled with a clear liquid. "This should help things move along more smoothly," he finished.

"What is it?" Devi demanded irritably.

"I'm sure you've watched enough television to know about truth serums," he taunted.

"Yes, and I've taken enough bio-chem to know there's no such thing," she shot back. Drugs like sodium pentothal might decrease higher brain functioning, making subjects more compliant, but there was no guarantee that what they said in such a state would be true, or even coherent — hypnotics were funny that way.

"Course not," Crowley smirked, "Just like there's no such thing as demons, right, lads?" His minions sniggered around her, and Devi felt a sinking in her stomach. Crowley took a syringe from a tray of instruments, and began to draw a measure of the clear fluid into it. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, "Last chance, darling — this little cocktail is nasty on it's own, and with everything else you're on... let's just say it won't be a pleasant ride."

"I'm breathless with anticipation," Devi deadpanned, giving him her best withering scowl.

Crowley grinned at her challenge. Eschewing her shredded arms, he tugged her collar to the side to inject the serum into her shoulder. It felt like ice water in her veins. As the cold crept across her chest, it met the acrid burn of the sight potion, mingling with it to produce a piercing agony that drove the air from her lungs.

"There, now you're breathless," Crowley quipped, his tone bleeding smugness. Devi struggled to answer him, but she could barely keep his face in focus. His features seemed to be shifting away from each other. The only thing that remained clear was his mouth, frozen in a smile of utter certainty.

## 17. Chapter 16: Morning After

Trigger Warning: Implications of dubious/non-consent

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 16: Morning After<strong>

"\_\_\*\*Everything in the world is about sex, except for sex. Sex is about power." - Oscar Wilde, attrib.\_\_"

Devishi was warm all over for the first time in she couldn't remember how long. She drifted in that delicious haze between sleep and

waking, floating on a sense of calm. There was the soothing weight of a down comforter on her body, and a feather pillow under her head. The linens carried a scent she couldn't quite place — something like citrus, something like smoke. Though her eyes were closed, she sensed a soft light to her left and rolled away to her other side, settling again with a contented sigh. The mattress beneath her was the perfect balance between softness and support, and she snuggled into it, chasing the dregs of sleep.

"Comfortable, love?" The soft gravel of the voice cut through her tranquility like a knife, jangling every nerve and instantly snapping her to wakefulness. She opened her eyes to see the demon king elegantly sprawled in a leather armchair, swirling a glass of whiskey in one hand and looking thoroughly self-satisfied. He was without his suit jacket and tie, his cuffs unbuttoned and the shirt-sleeves rolled up a few turns. There were slippers on his feet instead of the customary dress shoes. Noting his apparel make Devi notice her own, or rather, the lack of it. Her tattered scrubs were gone, leaving her in only her underwear, bra, and camisole. She hugged to the covers to her chest, appalled.

"What did you do?!" she shouted at the smirking man. He chuckled softly, rising from his "throne" and approaching the bed with the stride of stalking predator. The smile smeared across his lips was the definition of perverse.

"Me? You were the one in the driver's seat this time, darling," he oozed, reaching out a hand to brush against her cheek, "I did only what you asked." Devi gazed at him open-mouthed, speechless at his insinuation. She racked her memory, scrabbling for anything that could make sense of her situation. She slapped his hand away, color rushing to her face.

"I don't know what you think you're playing at," she hissed, "but I swear... where are my clothes?" She cast about her frantically.

"Oh, here and there," Crowley said airily, delicately lifting a torn bit of black fabric from the lampshade with his fingertips. Devi noticed the scrub pants, largely intact, strewn on floor on the far side of the bed; taking care to keep the covers over her, she leaned down to grab them and hastily drew them on. "I must say," the demon continued archly, "I've never seen that reaction to my bootleg 'Veritaserum.'"

"What are you talking about?" Devi snapped, "What reaction? What happened?"

Crowley looked at her conspiratorially, "Memory a bit fuzzy? Or are you trying not to remember?"

Devi was on the verge of again demanding an explanation when a series of recollections intruded: hot, dry lips pressed insistently against hers, alternate touches of tongue and teeth trailing down her neck, a hand tangled roughly in her hair, another stroking circles in the small of her back. Devi shook her head, as if that would rid her of the memories, but it only made them clearer. She saw Crowley in front of her, standing far too close, his face only inches from hers with a filthy grin on it. Her hands were on his shoulders, fisted in the material of his suit jacket; she couldn't tell whether she was pushing him away or clinging to him for dear life. He was speaking to

her now, his lips moving, but his words were too muffled to make out. There was an untraceable buzzing in her ears. She felt herself nod, and his grin widened as he spoke again, leaning in until their foreheads were practically touching. He stepped towards her, his hands at her waist, herding her backwards until she felt the bed at the back of her legs. He brought his head alongside hers, his scruff prickling the sensitive skin of her neck, causing her to break out in goose-bumps. She heard him speak again, right at her ear, and felt his hand on her shoulder slowly but inexorably pushing her down...

Devi's eyes, wide with horror, snapped back up to the present Crowley. She made a few gasping, abortive attempts to speak before clapping a hand across her mouth. Jumping out of the bed, she shot to the other side of the room in an effort to get as far from him as possible. She stood with her back to him, arms hugged across her chest, staring sightlessly out the window and shaking like a leaf. Crowley slid his hands into his pockets, sauntering over to her with a sigh, "It's a bit late for buyer's remorse, love."

Her head jerked up, her confusion evident, "Buyer's remorse?"

Poor little chit, he thought carelessly, hardly knows which way is up. "Our little agreement," he admonished, "You must know there's nothing for it once the contract is sealed."

"Contract?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes, this one," he grabbed her arm and held it out, causing letters the color of dried blood to appear on her skin. She grimaced in pain, and jerked out of his grip. He raised an eyebrow at her, "You're a terrible negotiator, darling. I almost felt bad giving you these terms," the corner of his mouth twisted up, "Almost."

The seer stared at her arm, tentatively tracing the fading writing with her other hand, before looking back up at Crowley with an odd expression. "So you have my soul," her eyes hardened and her mouth set in a firm line, "Take it then." She had guts, he had to give her that, but she was miles out of her league; time to twist the knife.

"Your soul. And daddy's. And mommy's. And all your little brothers', " he took a step towards her with each statement, following her matching retreat until she had backed herself against the wall, "All mine, living or dead, unless I hear everything that you see, until the day you die."

"No," she moaned, barely audible.

"Yes," he gripped her jaw, leaning down to level his gaze at her. He could feel her trembling, hear the ragged hitch of her breath â€" she was inches from panic, and he was delighted to give her that last little push.

"Why would I ever agree to that?" she gasped, all color draining from her face.

"For my expertise â€" you may have noticed I know a fair bit about your little gift," he answered smoothly, "With time, I can make you practically omniscient." He regarded her again, "Though I never

thought you'd be so very... accommodating." He ladened the word with as much innuendo as it could hold.

"I wouldn't... I wasn't... I would never sell them out, not for that, not for anything," the girl shook her head.

"Well, you weren't exactly feeling yourself, darling," he chortled.

"That can't be binding," she vied desperately, "You'd drugged me. I—"

"How many people do you think actually make these deals sober?" he cut her off, shoving her against the wall, "If we insisted on temperance, we'd never get anyone in." She struggled in his grip as he loomed over her, "The point is, the deal was made. And you'll keep it," he leaned in to speak directly against her ear, "Or I'll tear them to pieces in front of you, over and over again, for the rest of time." The girl let out a strangled sob and slid down the wall, clutching her arms as if remembering the pain he'd carved there. He'd closed the wounds when he put her in bed — no sense in soiling the linens — but the gashes still stood clear. He looked down his nose at her, a conqueror surveying his takings. "Do we have an understanding?" he asked, his voice like oil on stone.

Devi sat on the floor in front of him, hugging her knees to her chest, a thousand-yard stare on her face. Her breathing was stilted and heavy, catching in her lungs as if it hurt her. She dug her nails into her arms, reopening the cuts, as if pain might dispel the nightmare she'd found herself in. Nausea crept up her throat, threatening to choke her, and she swallowed hard to keep it down. Her thoughts were running a mile a minute, scouring the situation for any chance of escape, but there was nothing, no way out, no gap to slip through. Crowley had had her made from day one, had always known just which string to pull. Devi closed her eyes, dropping her head to her knees. She heard Crowley shift above her, impatient for her answer. Drawing in shuddering breath, she nodded limply.

"Splendid," he said, "now, as we were—" A buzzing from his pocket interrupted, and he pulled out his cell phone. "This is the King," he answered brightly, listening to the other person for a moment before grinning and chuckling to himself. "You're headed to meet them now?" he prodded, "Where?" He narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips in response to what he heard. "I can assure you, my dear," he vaunted, "You will get everything that's coming to you." Devi suppressed a shudder at the wicked intent on his face. "When you arrive, you know what to do?" he continued, "Break the line, yes. That, and your presence as a focal point, will be all we need." He smiled, "It's a date — see you in an hour, darling."

Crowley ended the call and turned back to his current victim. "Well, it seems you've become a bit superfluous," he gloated, "What a shame, too, just as we'd worked out the terms of our relationship." He bent down, caressing her cheek, "Still, I suppose we can find some use for you." The seer flinched from his touch as if it burned her.

He snapped his fingers for a minion, and one of his enforcers came through the door. "Strap her back in, and put her on a constant feed," he instructed, "saline in one arm, solution in the other. Someone is going to be reading that tablet shortly." The hulking

man strode over and pulled the girl up by her arm, hauling her out the door.

Crowley glanced down at his hand, noticing the blood on it for the first time. It must have seeped out of the girl's wounds when he'd held her against the wall. He smoothed the blood between his thumb and fingers, relishing the silky texture. His other hand fingered the hex bag in his pocket, the one he'd lifted from under the mattress while her back had been turned. A touch dramatic on his part, but the girl had to think she'd been capable of anything the night before. He stuck his fingers in his mouth one by one, sucking the blood from them and savoring coppery tang. The seer had been a hard nut to crack, but everyone had their price. He smiled to himself — no-one got the better of the King of Hell.

## 18. Chapter 17: Eucatastrophe

Implied dubious consent

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 17: Eucatastrophe<strong>

"I will not let anyone walk through my mind with their dirty feet." - Mahatma Gandhi \*\*

Devishi walked down the hall to the room with chair in a state of total numbness. She barely heard the jeers of the demons as they strapped her down. The full dose of Crowley's potion hit her fast, pushing her into the minds of the people in the next room, the potential prophets. Devi let herself be sucked in by the tide of outside thoughts, feelings, and sensations. She infinitely preferred being in someone else's head right now, as opposed to her own.

Since the first flashback, further half-clear sensations kept trickling in: the dry rustle of bed-sheets, heavy hands and a bearded mouth persistently roaming her skin, the press of another body against hers, the citrus and smoke scent of expensive whiskey, and Crowley's leering smirk presiding throughout. She shied away from the memories, trying to fend them off or stuff them away in some dark corner of her mind where she's not have to see them, feel them, but they kept coming. The worst part was the creeping, crawling exhilaration that seemed tied to them, as if some horrifying part of herself had enjoyed, even exalted in being utterly subjected. It made her sick.

The prophets-in-waiting were no better or worse than when she'd last tried to see through them, although the drug no longer seemed formulated to track them. She was able to flit from one mind to the next, rather than being barraged by all six at once. Anxiety was the most prominent note. Sven had a strong sense of irritation competing with his fear; despite his near-perfect understanding of English, nothing that had been said since he'd arrived in this awful place made a bit of sense. Luigi had taken young Aaron under his wing, sneaking him a caramel he'd had in his pocket and an affectionate ruffle of hair whenever the boy crept out of hiding. Luigi's own sense of the situation wasn't terribly clear, due to the language barrier. Maria was in the same boat, but she felt in her bones that everything about the person holding them was violently wrong; she

hadn't stopped telling her rosary since the suited man had killed the bus driver. Krista was still clinging to a shred of irrational optimism, thinking that there might be some way to reach a compromise with their captors. She really had no idea. As for Justin, he still thought they were on a spaceship. Devi supposed that was easier to deal with than reality.

She sensed a ripple of shock in the room as Crowley suddenly appeared. Someone was with him — Kevin Tran. Devi settled on his mind cautiously, not sure if he'd sense her and try to throw her out again. His thoughts were a flood of despair that fostered a surge of sympathetic distress in her. It nearly bowled her over. Beneath that layer, there were a series of images and memories regarding his mother interwoven with a tremulous, but growing sense of grim determination. Not daring to hope, Devi spoke softly into his mind, mentally whispering his name.

\_Kevin? \_She felt him startle slightly, unsure of what he'd "heard." She tried again. \_Kevin, it's me, the uh... person who was spying on you. \_She realized that probably was the worst possible introduction, but there was barely any response from the Prophet. He must be in shock. \_What's happen—

"You just killed my mother," he spoke suddenly, and it took Devi a moment to realize he wasn't talking to her.

"Very unfortunate," Crowley's voice replied, and Devi saw him walking around the table, "But to be fair, she was plotting to kill me and my kind." \_What, \_Devi thought, \_Kill him how? \_He settled next to Kevin, who refused to look at him. "Kevin," Crowley cajoled, "Kev... I can do a great deal for a plucky lad like you."

\_Liar\_, Devi thought, but Kevin beat her to it, "You'll just kill me as soon as I read the tablet."

"Ah, are all young people so horribly cynical?" Crowley asked, circling behind Kevin and putting a hand on his shoulder, "That depresses me, Kevin." Crowley sat on the table on Kevin's other side, still pontificating "Here's the thing: I really want you to read the tablet because, frankly, this lot fail to inspire." Kevin glanced around the room as Crowley continued, "However, better a stupid prophet than a stubborn prophet, as the saying goes. So what's it gonna be?" His tone was low, dangerously soft. Kevin said nothing.

\_Don't tell him,\_ Devi thought desperately, \_You can't—

\_I know,\_ Kevin replied mentally. Devi started — that had never happened before. It must be the dosage of the drug, or how close Kevin was.

"Perhaps you doubt that I'm serious," Crowley said after a moment. Sliding down from the table, he moved to stand behind Kevin and raised a hand. Krista rose in the air, gasping for breath, her neck and limbs rigid, bent at unnatural angles. She hovered for a moment, locked in pain. Then Crowley snapped his fingers, and her body burst. The horror in Kevin's mind threw Devi back into her own body, where she lay panting, a cold sweat on her skin. She swallowed back bile, shivering; she hadn't known Crowley's powers were capable of that. When he'd pinned her to the table the day before, he'd used tools,

his hands, but to shred a person to molecules with a gesture... few things could have better demonstrated his ability or his character so effectively.

A demon entered to room, spoke lowly with the two others that were overseeing the transfusion, and nodded in her direction. One of her watchers came over and opened the feed on the IV, increasing the drip rate. The drug pressed Devi back into her sight, fading out the room around her.

She cast her mind back to Kevin, and saw he was being led by two of Crowley's burlier men to the basement level room where she'd heard Crowley torturing someone. They tied him down to a blood-stained steel and concrete chair, leaving him with Crowley. Devi felt the fear blooming in Kevin, but he beat it back, determined to give the demon nothing. Crowley sat on a rolling stool across from Kevin, looking grim.

"I thought privacy might make it easier to chat," he said, "Decision time, Kevin â€“ how's this gonna go?" Kevin stayed silent, staring at Crowley impassively. Crowley tightened his jaw, "Don't be recalcitrant, Kevin. You know it brings out the worst in me." Oh, Mahadeva, Devi thought to herself. Crowley turned to a nearby shelf, swept up a knife, and lopped off Kevin's left little finger in one swift movement, chopping through the digit like he was cutting a carrot. Kevin's scream and accompanying surge of agony crashed into Devi, and she attempted to escape it by retreating into her own mind. The high dose of the potion precluded that, however, keeping her psyche pressed against his pain. Reeling, she reached out to his mind, trying to find some way to mediate what he, and by extension she, was experiencing. Breathe, she called out, Focus on breathing.

"Alright!" Kevin gasped out, "Enough! I'll do it." Devi could hardly blame him. I'll try to stall, she heard him think.

Be careful, she warned, to which she heard the wry reply of Got that.

Crowley had Kevin's hand bandaged with a snap of his fingers. Probably doesn't want me bleeding on his precious hunk of rock, Kevin mused. Kevin began slowly, hesitantly, acting as if the tablet was hard to read. He started with the less important "chapter headings," things Crowley could be expected to know already.

Devi noticed that Crowley's theory had been wrong â€“ she could decipher nothing of the lines of pictographs, other than it was giving Kevin a headache. For her, it was like trying to read through someone else's glasses. I'm going to have a sympathetic migraine at the end of this, she thought, not realizing Kevin could hear her until she caught his mental whisper of Sorry. She rushed to reassure him, Don't be sorry! I think we can blame the psychopath who has me so hopped up on psychic speed that I can't keep my brain to myself for that.

Said psychopath was becoming impatient with Kevin's readings. "Tell me something I don't know," he grumbled, "Think macro â€“ this is stupefyingly micro."

"How macro?" Kevin asked.

"Game-changing," Crowley ordered.

So much for stalling, \_Kevin thought. He moved on to later sections, still going slowly.

After a moment, Crowley hurried him again, "Don't provoke me, Kevin. You still have nine fingers." Devi felt a stab of pain and loss sift through Kevin's mind at the reminder. Like Frodo, \_she thought in effort to encourage him, and felt a faint warmth in response.

"This section has to do with building defensive weapons against demons," he said with a tremor in his voice.

"Hm, you're familiar with that one, I believe," Crowley quipped, catching Devi's attention. Kevin sensed her curiosity. I kind of bombed Crowley's last hideout,\_ he informed her.

Devi was impressed, So they can be killed. \_She clung to the first bit of good news she'd had in days.

Not easily, \_Kevin replied.

I'll take what I can get, \_Devi thought grimly.

Kevin's reluctance was palpable as he read off the next section, "This one describes... sealing the gate of Hell..." If anyone could pull it off... \_his thought trailed off.

"So, it's true â€“ it's there," Crowley was suddenly riveted. "Clearly humans cannot possess this thing. What was God thinking?" Was that a hint of fear in his voice? Devi couldn't be sure, having never seen or heard the demon exhibit that emotion, but it sounded like it.

What would closing the gates do?\_ she asked Kevin.

All the demons would be sucked back into Hell and stuck inside, \_Kevin told her,\_ trapped in the prison they made.\_

Crowley was urging Kevin to continue again, having given the Prophet his full attention. He even laid aside the pinwheel he'd been amusing himself with. Where the hell had he gotten that thing?\_ Devi wondered, and thought she felt the tiniest flicker of humor in Kevin.

It was a snap, \_he sent her.

Really? \_she teased, \_We're captives of the King of Hell, being tortured for information; I'm pretty sure my brain is going to start leaking out my ears soon, and you're gonna go with "It was a snap"?

—  
Fortunately, Crowley seemed more interested in the rest of the tablet than the particulars of locking up Hell. Kevin went on until he came to an odd shift in the text â€“ an editor's note. "So ends the transcription of the Sacred Word for the defense of mankind," Kevin read, "Into the hands of God's children thus passes the compendium of tablets."

"Compendium?" Crowley reflected. As Kevin started to define the term, Devi felt something tug at her focus. The other prophets, something had startled them. Devi strained her mind to catch some scrap of sight or sound; she got the image of a very tall man with a concerned expression holding out his hands in a gesture of reassurance "the passenger from the black car.

Kevin, I think someone's here, she thought, Someone not with Crowley. She felt a faint shade of hope in him. At the same moment, she heard through his ears a brief commotion in the hall. Crowley didn't seem to notice, rapt in his own pondering.

"There are more tablets," he mused to himself, "More than Leviathan and Demon..."

At that instant, the atmosphere in the room shifted, and a man appeared on the other side of the table Kevin was seated at. He had dark hair and was wearing a beige trench-coat. Kevin recognized him, and Devi felt a cluster of emotion from the Prophet, confusion being uppermost. Whoever the man in the coat was, he was very different from how Kevin remembered.

"Castiel," Crowley began smoothly, "Fresh from Purgatory. Wish you'd called first."

"Crowley," the coated man replied coldly. His tone spoke of a history with the demon, and not a friendly one at that.

"Which Castiel is it this time?" Crowley continued, "I'm never sure "madman or megalomaniac?"

The coated man didn't deign to reply, stepping toward the prophet. "Kevin is coming with me," he stated baldly.

Crowley likewise stepped forward, and Devi felt a surge of fear for the stranger. Doesn't he know-

He knows better than anyone, Kevin corrected, He's an angel. He pushed his stool back as both men drew out long silver blades like tent stakes.

He's a what now? Devi was certain she's "misheard" Kevin, but at that point the man in the trench-coat started to glow. His eyes became points of electric blue, a high-pitched ringing filled the room, and on the wall behind him, two great shadows spread to either side " wings. Ar\_Ã© baap re, Devi was so overawed that her mind automatically slipped back into Hindi.

"You're bluffing!" Crowley barked at his opponent.

"You really want to take that chance?" the man, or rather, angel, replied, stretching out a hand. Crowley dived under his arm, grabbing the tablet. Castiel slammed his hand down on the stone, breaking it in half. Crowley vanished with his piece, and the coated man collapsed to the ground amid the shards of shattered glass. The door burst open to reveal yet another newcomer, slightly taller than the angel, with short, brown hair and a determined expression: the black car's driver. Glancing quickly at Kevin, he hurried to the angel's side as the Prophet stooped for the other half of the stone.

"Crowley's got other people here," Kevin said, "We need to find them!"

"Okay, take it easy," the man next to Castiel answered, "We know about the other prophets; Sammy's on it."

"No, someone else, Dean," Kevin insisted, then asked, "Where are you?" roughly in the direction of the ceiling.

"Uh, Kev, we're right here," Dean answered, looking concerned, "It's just us here, kiddo."

I'm in a room next to the one where the other prophets are being kept, \_Devi responded, \_Someone's here with them â€“ long hair, really tall, plaid shirt...\_

"That's Sam," Kevin said, "He's with us; he can help you."

"Who are you talking to?!" Dean was very worried now, "Seriously, did Crowley knock a wire loose in you?"

"There's this girl who I hear in my head," Kevin explained, badly.

Dean looked at him like he'd lost his mind, "Oh, that's reassuring."

Tell him I'm a seer, \_Devi thought, \_That might help.\_

"Dean," the angel spoke up suddenly, "There's someone else here."

Dean set his jaw and gave a long-suffering sigh, "Thanks, Cas, I'm gettin' that."

Guys? Maybe hurry, 'cause there were demons in this room with me, and I don't know if they're still here \_

"We need to go," Kevin urged, "She's says there's demons with her!"

"Hold on a minute! Who is this person?" Dean shouted, "How is she in your head?"

"She's a seer," Kevin explained, and the angel immediately vanished from the room. "Someone's coming, hang on," Kevin said to the ceiling.

\* \* \*

><p>Devi felt someone jostling her, and the sensation drew her back to her own body. She opened bleary eyes to see one of the demons frantically trying to undo the straps on her arms, the other likewise struggling at her feet. Suddenly, the man in the trench-coat appeared behind them. Grabbing one by the collar, he stabbed the other in the back with his blade. The demon stuttered and a flash of light flared inside him, glaring out of his eyes and mouth, illuminating the outline of his skeleton. The angel jerked the knife out of the first demon and jammed it into the chest of the second with similar result,

like he'd been burned alive from the inside out.<p>

The man in the trench-coat leaned over her with an expression between concern and curiosity, as the door banged open to reveal Kevin and both of the men who'd come for him. The shorter one, Dean, put a hand out to stop Kevin from rushing in, and glanced around the room, gun drawn, checking for enemies. Seeing none, he stepped aside and Kevin hurried over to the chair and started tugging at the straps. Sam stepped over to help unfasten her.

"Dammit, Cas," Dean said, coming up to the angel, "You can't just poof around a demon compound at half-power! Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"I was trying to ensure that Crowley wouldn't have a means to find the Prophet again," Castiel explained serenely. His calm seemed to irritate his friend, but Dean let it slide for the moment.

"What, her?" Dean nodded to Devi, "What's special about her?"

"Hey!" Devi interjected, her voice hoarse, "I'm right here." She was still dizzy and nauseous, her temples were pounding, and she was close to falling asleep, despite her discomfort. She rubbed at her wrists, trying to get feeling back in her fingers.

"She's a seer," Kevin said, "Crowley was using her to try to track me."

"A seer?" Sam asked, "Is that like a psychic?"

"Not exactly," Devi and Castiel said simultaneously.

"And what's this stuff?" Dean gestured to the bag of solution.

"Magic potion," Devi rasped, "Crowley used it to make me see, to find Kevin."

Castiel frowned at the IV running to her arm, "This is poisoning her."

Devi laughed weakly, "That's what I told them."

Dean withdrew the needle carefully from her arm, whistling softly at the large gauge, and tied a bandanna around her elbow. Meanwhile, the angel pressed two fingers to her forehead, concentrated, and Devi felt a surge of clarity in her mind, followed by blessed silence. No longer were images, sounds, emotions, and instincts seeping into her brain from Kevin and the other prophets; she was finally alone in her own head. Except for a slight headache, all her physical symptoms were gone.

"Wow," she said, looking up at Castiel, "How... What did...?"

"I've purged the toxins from your system," he said, his voice gruff, but kind, "and repaired some latent damage to your liver. You should experience no further effects from this substance."

"Thanks," she responded, not knowing what else to say.

"Now, what do you mean Crowley made you 'see'?" Dean asked.

Devi took a deep breath before answering, "Sometimes, I have these dreams, or visions, I guess, where I can see and hear what other people are experiencing. It's usually people I'm close to. I didn't know they were real until..." she shook her head, "Anyway, Crowley made up this stuff," she nodded to the IV drip, "That made me see these things, and could, sort of, direct me towards seeing through certain people."

"Like Kevin," Sam put in.

"Yeah, but something was weird," Devi expanded, "Kevin could tell when I was seeing through him, like he could feel me in his head." She looked to the Prophet, "Eventually, he was able to block me out, so Crowley set me to find the other prophets." Devi frowned, puzzled, "That was harder, not having a tether..."

"What do you mean 'tether'?" Dean pressed.

"With the first doses, Crowley put a bit of your hair in," Devi pointed to Kevin, who looked affronted, "and had me read a lot about you, but for the others, I only had a name at first, and a broad location."

"Your ability has grown," Castiel said, "but it remains to be seen how much of this will be retained without this... abhorrence." He gestured to the drip bag with an expression of disgust.

"So, she might be able to do it again?" Dean frowned, "Great."

Sam gave him a rueful smile, then turned back to her, "So, you have a name?"

"Devishi Chaudhuri," she said, extending a hand to him, then looking to Kevin, "Nice to finally meet you."

#### 19. Chapter 18: Fallout

\*\*Chapter 18: Fallout\*\*

\_\*\*Now a slave is not 'held' by any legal contract, obligation, duty, or authority, which the laws will enforce. He is 'held' only by brute force.

>- Lysander Spooner<strong>\_

Devishi leaned against the chain link fence outside the factory, watching the brothers speak to Kevin and his mother. Apparently, Mrs. Tran had survived the attack by Crowley's minion, going so far as to incapacitate the goon, tie him up in her trunk, and deliver him to Sam and Dean for questioning. That was how the brothers had found the compound. My kind of woman, Devi thought approvingly. At the sight of Devi's bare shoulders and hunched posture, the taller one, Sam, had lent her his jacket. She was practically swimming in the over-sized garment, but she appreciated the gesture and the warmth. Having finished his conversation with the Trans, Sam came over to her.

"The police are on their way for the other prophets," he said,

"They'll be able to take you home."

"I can't go home." Sam blinked at her in surprise. "You should take Kevin and get away from this place," she continued, her tone flat and dead, "Before they come back."

"Uh, okay, well, if you're worried about Crowley coming after you, we're having a hunter friend of ours take the Trans to a safe house," he went on, "I'm sure we can do the same for you."

"No," Devi refused to meet his eyes, "I can't."

"Look, there are ways to guard against demons," Sam urged, "to hide from them. We can—"

"I can't escape him!" she shouted, then huddled back into his coat as if startled by her own outburst. "You don't understand," she continued in a calmer tone, "He... we made a deal."

"A deal!" Sam was aghast, "Crowley owns your soul?"

Devi gave a humorless chuckle. "My soul, my parents', my brothers'," she shook her head, "Only everyone who counts, everyone I care most about."

"Wait, you made a deal for your family as well?" Sam asked, "How?"

"I was drugged," Devi answered, "I don't even remember it happening, but apparently, that doesn't make any difference." By this point, Dean and the angel had wandered over.

"But that doesn't make any sense," Sam frowned. Devi glared up at him with a combination of confusion and anger; she felt bad enough as it was. Sam caught her look and hastily clarified, "No, I mean, you can't trade other people's souls. You can only sell your own."

Devi was dumbfounded. Clutching the chain-link fence with one hand, she sank into a crouch, her legs shaking. Crowley had lied. Her mind could hardly hold the bare thought, but if it was true, it could mean salvation for her family. "Hey, hey," Sam caught her as she knelt, wrapping his long arms around her, "You're okay... It's going to be okay." Devi huddled against his chest; he smelled like Irish Spring soap and cedar wood. Sam looked to his brother.

The shorter man thought a moment, before turning to his trench-coat clad associate. "Cas, check her soul."

"Whoa, hold on," Sam objected, standing to speak, "She's in no condition..."

"If that limey bastard lied about part of the deal, he might have lied about the whole thing," Dean cut in, "Checking her soul's the only way to know if she's bound to anything."

"You can tell that?" Devi put in hopefully, her voice desperate.

"See," Dean said, pointing to her, "She wants to know."

"Is that what this is about," Sam countered, his tone hardening, "Or are you using this as an opportunity to power Cas up?"

Dean spread his arms, "Hey, if it charges his batteries while getting answers, I call that a win all around."

"And what will it do to her?" Sam pressed.

As they argued, the dark-haired man in the trench-coat stood aloof, now and then glancing at Devi. He had intrigued her since he had pulled her from the chair, magically clearing her body of Crowley's poison with just a touch. His eyes were wise, unimaginably ancient, but deeply sad. Strangest of all, Devi could sense some sort of light or warmth seemed to radiate from his presence. It wasn't physical; the nearest she could compare it to was looking at the sun with closed eyes, being able to find its position merely by the suggestion of light and heat.

Kevin had introduced him as angel " she wasn't even sure what that meant. She had seen pictures of angels, mostly serene, androgynous creatures in flowing robes on Christmas cards, or chubby cherubs at Valentine's. Castiel bore no resemblance to either in any way, except perhaps in the quiet calm with which he held himself. He noticed her watching him, and she looked away, blushing. She couldn't quite describe how he made her feel. It reminded her of going to see big cats at the zoo, the sense of enormous power effortlessly restrained. Castiel put a hand out between the two brothers, who were edging from mere disagreement into a full-blown argument.

"There may be another way," he said, walking over to Devi, "You said you have no memory of making any deal, that you were under the influence of a drug?" Devi nodded. Castiel looked down at her with those electric blue eyes, "I'm going to delve into your memories, see if I can find anything that can shed light on this matter. You may feel some discomfort." He reached out two fingers to her forehead.

"No, no please," Devi caught his wrist and pulled away, "Please, don't look."

Castiel looked confused, "This will not harm you in any..."

"I don't want you to see, please," Devi felt tears start in her eyes, "Not that." The angel regarded her with near-bottomless sympathy, silently asking for her permission. Devi could feel his compassion so strongly, almost like physical force; she lowered her hand, trembling, and allowed him to proceed. A flurry of sensations, all jumbled together, passed through her mind: rustling sheets, heavy hands, demanding mouth, the pervading scent of whiskey.

"These memories are all wrong," Castiel's voice broke through, and shame flooded her as she thought of the disgust he must feel. I'm sorry, she whispered in her mind. "They don't belong to you," the angel continued, "They've been planted in your mind."

She opened her eyes, staring at him in shock, "Is that possible?" Sam and Dean looked equally surprised.

"There are certain spells that can alter memories," Castiel pursed his lips, "I'm not sure which may have been used here." He continued

past the images, seeking the starting point of the alien thoughts, searching for "native" memories.

Devi again saw a grinning Crowley before her. The demon took a quick step forward, and her unsteady legs betrayed her as she tried to back up. She nearly fell, only saving herself by grabbing hold of his shoulders. He caught her around the waist, holding her in the awkward position of imbalance.

"You're going to be difficult about this, too, aren't you?" Crowley asked, his voice a low growl. Devi nodded in response, and he leaned in further, "I do so love a challenge." Backing her against the bed, he brought his head close, purring in her ear, "Sweet dreams, love." He shoved her down on the bed... and stepped away. Devi was perplexed. The memory faded, and she supposed she must have fallen asleep at that point. The next set of recollections was the following morning, Crowley telling her about the deal, the shock and the heartache.

Castiel broke contact and took a respectful step back. "Strange," he mused, "You have absolutely no memory of making any deal." He met her eyes, "I can only conclude that no deal occurred."

"But he showed me," Devi objected, "The contract, he showed me the writing on my skin."

Castiel took her hands in his, holding her arms out. He murmured in a strange language, and lines like old blood formed on her skin, but without the accompanying burn. The angel studied the writing, his look of concentration never shifting, "It appears to be some sort of agreement, for something called..." He leaned in to scrutinize her forehead, causing Devi to bend back slightly, "'itinez.'"

"You mean 'iTunes'?" Dean clarified, his tone skeptical, "he wrote the iTunes user agreement on her, and told her it was for her family's souls?"

"Are you sure, Cas?" Sam asked cautiously, "He didn't just copy the language, stick in 'souls' for 'songs,' or something like that?"

"Well, I haven't read everything," Castiel admitted, coloring slightly, "It covers her whole body, but the text seems to repeat several times. There's nothing at all about souls that I can see." He lowered Devi's hands, "I believe the spell is merely cosmetic; I sense no power in it." Devi looked at him hopefully, and he gave her an encouraging smile, "I can remove it, if you would like." She nodded numbly, and felt a tingling sensation as he purged her skin of the magic.

"So, the... other things," she spoke haltingly, fearing the answer, "They didn't happen?"

"Not to you," the angel replied, "It's likely they were the natural memories of another person, grafted into your mind by sorcery." Devi took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She hadn't felt this light in days, in weeks even.

"I can erase the false memories," he continued.

"Yes, please," Devi said.

"Some echos may remain," Castiel cautioned, "Since your real memories now include recalling false ones. Unless you'd like me to erase this experience, as well?"

"No," Devi replied slowly, "I think it'll be okay. It sounds weird, but... I want to remember what didn't happen. Does that make sense?" The angel's expression suggested not, but he nodded agreeably anyway, again placing two fingers on her forehead, and Devi felt something like a cool breeze blowing through her mind.

"Well, that's great and all," Dean interposed, "but we still have the problem of you being a satellite tracking system on Kevin." The Prophet in question had joined the circle at this point.

"At this point, Kevin can tell when I'm seeing through him," Devi pointed out, "and he can push me out if he wants to." Kevin nodded in agreement.

"Some warding against spells and witchcraft that might help, too," Sam said pensively, "at least if the potion is involved."

"Even if Kevin is safe," Castiel objected, "Crowley having use of a seer would be problematic."

"He's right," Dean said, looking grim, "With her, that sonofabitch could have eyes on any of us. How are we supposed to board up Hell with him breathing down our necks?"

Sam looked at her, concern and compassion etched on his face. "We can hide you, just like the Trans."

"And my family?" Devi closed her eyes, swallowing hard, "I don't care what he does to me, but they're how he got to me this time. I'm sure he won't hesitate to use them again."

"You guys have safe houses, right?" Kevin said, looking to Sam and Dean hopefully.

Devi laughed humorlessly, "It better be a big house â€“ I've got twenty first cousins."

"Hold on," Dean put out a hand, "You can't expect us to hide your whole clan â€“ we're talking just your immediate family."

"They are my immediate family," Devi protested, "You don't understand. We all live in the same zip code. We see each other at least once a week."

"So set up a Skype chat," Dean said carelessly.

"That's not the point," Devi snapped, "The point is they're easy to find. If Crowley comes looking and can't find me or my parents or brothers, you think he's going to just shrug and cut his losses?" She felt tears start in her eyes, and angrily blinked them away, "He will rip into them just out of spite." Dean looked ready to argue, but Mrs. Tran stepped in.

"Alright, enough," she clipped out, "We can finish this conversation

once Kevin has his finger back and we're far away from here."

Castiel agreed, "She's right. We're far too exposed here."

"And the police are on their way," Sam added, "We should be gone when they get here."

Dean shrugged emphatically, outnumbered, "Fine, it'll take Garth a while to get here. We might as well go somewhere we can wait in comfort" or at least get something to eat."

"Atlantic is closest," Sam offered.

Devi frowned, confused, "Atlantic what? The ocean?"

"No, Atlantic, Iowa," Dean clarified.

"Iowa? Iowa!" Devi was astonished, "How the hell are we in Iowa?"

"Uh, we're in between Minnesota and Missouri?" Dean offered wryly, "Why?"

"I came here from Norfolk, Virginia, in a van," Devi protested, "It took half an hour!"

"Demons of sufficient power are capable of transporting instantaneously from place to place," Castiel explained, "as well as creating passages between. I believe you'd call it 'teleporting'."

Devi collapsed against the fence again; it had been an extremely long day.

## 20. Chapter 19: Truth or Consequences

\*\*Chapter 19: Truth or Consequences\*\*

\_\*\*A person often meets his destiny on the road he took to avoid it.

>- Jean de La Fontaine<strong>\_

"He made her think \_what\_?" Dean, Sam, and Castiel were seated around a table in the motel room, discussing their options. It was rather nicer than their usual digs; Mrs. Tran had insisted on paying for, and therefore, on picking the place. She and Kevin were in the connected room next door. Dean was staring at Castiel, mouth agape. Sam shushed him, glancing over his shoulder at the closed bathroom door; the muffled sound of the shower running could be heard beyond.

"The false memories indicated that some measure of physical intimacy occurred," Castiel replied, blushing, "She was most reluctant to let me into her mind."

"Yeah, I bet," Dean affirmed, "first time I meet an angel, I don't want him thinking I was getting down and dirty with a demon, huh, Sam?"

Sam avoided his gaze, but looked equally appalled. "Why would he do that?" he asked.

"'Cause he's a massive dick, that's why!" Dean spat venomously.

"I'm not sure what Crowley was trying to accomplish," Castiel responded slowly, "Perhaps he intended to make her question her sanity?"

"Maybe," Sam replied, shaking his head, "It sounds like it was part of his charade about her making a deal. Think about it, selling out her family is something she would never have done normally."

"You think he planted those memories to make her think she was... messed up enough to do it?" Dean asked, "To do all of it?" Sam nodded and Dean swore under his breath.

"Regardless, Crowley's investment in her has already paid off once," Castiel said, "He will likely try to make use of her again." He sighed, "It is vital that she be kept out of his hands."

"Which brings us back to our problem," Sam pointed out, "How do we do that?"

"Well, we can't put up her whole Big, Fat Indian family," Dean said, "What are we supposed to do, ward a whole subdivision?"

"She was insistent," Castiel mentioned apologetically, "She went along with Crowley as far as she did primarily to keep them safe."

"And after losing both her and Kevin, that will be Crowley's first lead to finding them again." Sam added.

"Which is why we'd be nuts to walk right into it!" Dean objected, "We can't let her go."

"You want to tell her she can't go home?" Sam asked, raising his eyebrows, "That'll go over well."

"We made this same mistake with Kevin, and look how that worked out!" Dean argued.

"Well, that wasn't actually a mistake," Sam protested "I mean, we did pick up his mom from under a bunch of demons, and that went okay until you, uh, tried to kill her."

"Sam..." Dean began, holding up a finger.

Castiel frowned contemplatively, "It might be wise to see what has happened with the seer's relatives, rather than make a decision sight unseen."

"Cas, I don't know how strong your sense of geography is," Dean retorted, "but Norfolk is half-way across the freakin' country."

"I could go there myself," Castiel replied, "but I'll need some time to gather strength."

Dean strongly disapproved of that plan. "I'm not having you land on the front step of house that's probably packed with demons, exhausted, without backup," he said firmly, then sighed, "I guess the drive will give you time to recharge."

Sam glanced again at the bathroom door, "Speaking of recharging, hasn't she been in there a while?"

"I haven't heard any movement from some time," Castiel said, "Why, should we be concerned?"

"Devishi?" Sam said, rising, "Hey, um, are you okay?" He tapped tentatively at the door.

"She seems to have fallen asleep," Castiel's voice sounded from inside the bathroom.

Dean jumped up, "Cas, you can't just pop in on a chick in the bathroom!" The door opened to reveal Castiel carrying the unconscious girl, her body wrapped in a towel. Sam's eyebrows climbed toward his hairline, and he dashed into the bathroom as Castiel exited, grabbing another towel. Castiel headed towards the nearest bed, and Sam hurried to pull back the covers before folding his towel in half and laying it on the pillow. Devi's hair was still dripping.

"She fell asleep in the shower?" he asked.

"Yep," Dean answered from the bathroom, where he was shutting off the faucet. "She must have really been out of it, too" he said as he emerged, shaking droplets from his hand, "the water was already going cold."

Castiel gently lay the girl down on the bed, and stepped back as Sam drew the covers over her. Sam paused, looking at her arm, "Cas, what are these marks? I saw the cuts when we found her..."

"Yes, I was able to close the wounds, but healing them fully would have taken more power," Castiel explained, a little shamefaced, "I thought it best to prioritize the harm to her internal organs."

"Oh no, I know you did your best, Cas," Sam said quickly, "I mean, what are they from?"

"Well, I can't be sure, but judging by the tissue damage," Castiel expounded, "the incisions were made with a hot, edged instrument." He gestured towards her, "There are similar injuries on her legs and stomach."

"Son of a bitch\_!" Dean paced for a moment, arms akimbo, before storming towards the front door. "I need some air," he said, shutting the door forcefully behind him.

Castiel watched him go, then sighed, "I'll try healing her again in a bit."

"Just don't strain yourself, Cas," Sam said, putting a hand on his shoulder, "You gotta take care of you, too." Sam ran a hand through his hair distractedly, "Okay, um, I'm going to see if Kevin and Mrs. Tran want anything to eat. Can you keep an eye on her?" Castiel nodded. When Sam left the room, the angel was attentively watching

her sleep. Sam shook his head, smiling as he walked out the door â€“ trust Cas to take his instructions literally.

The seer lay curled up on her side, one hand under her head, the other tucked beneath the pillow. Sam had pulled the comforter up to her chin, but she had snuggled down further until her nose was covered as well. Like a fox with its tail, Castiel thought. He had watched humans sleep before, but still found it fascinating. Lots of animals slept, of course, but it was especially odd to see in a sapient creature. How strange that God should go to such trouble to develop sentience in a physical being that then had to shut down its consciousness for half its life. And dreaming: parts of the mental substrata that were repressed, neglected, or just too quiet to be heard while waking rose to the surface, making themselves known and working out matters that arose below the level of awareness, processing the past, preparing for the future. It was wondrous.

But then, not all dreams were good. Castiel remembered times he'd been called to Dean's side, drawn by a sense of desperate fear and anguish, only to find him struggling in his sleep. There were some demons even an angel couldn't cast out. He noticed Devi shift against the pillow, her brow knitting, and he gently pressed two fingers to her forehead. She'd had enough nightmares.

\* \* \*

><p>Devishi was swimming, wending her way up a river in the dead of night. A half-moon spilled shards of silver on the crests of small waves rippling around her body. The water felt warm and silky against her skin. She could hear it lapping gently against the banks on either side, and the wind sliding softly through the reeds along the shore. Moving with the current, she had only to maintain a languid front crawl, keeping her head above water. The water was brackish, and the air smelled of salt and decaying vegetation. <em>A salt marsh,</em> she thought, like those in the Bay. The breeze was in her face, so she must be heading toward the sea.

Coming to a place where the reeds opened out, she stopped, treading water and trying to see which way to go. There was a slight splash to her left, and ripples spread from a stand of cat-tails. Probably just a frog, she thought, but starting swimming away from the noise all the same. After a few strokes, she heard another splash, this time on her right. She picked up speed, not entirely sure why. The back of her neck prickled â€“ something was wrong. She'd gone a little further when it hit her: silence. Normally, a marsh at night would be a riotous chorus of frogs peeping, insects cheeping, night birds calling, even the flutter and chirp of bats. Except for wind and water, she'd heard nothing. Another splash, slightly behind her, and ripples ran towards her. Something was coming. A shiver ran through her, and Devi realized she wasn't afraid; whatever it was, she was anticipating it.

## 21. Chapter 20: Regroup

\*\*Chapter 20: Regroup\*\*

\*\*Never contract friendship with a man that is not better than thyself. - Confucius\*\*

The sound of the door opening, followed by a knocking drew Devishi out of sleep, and she rolled over to see the elder of the two brothers who'd saved her — Dean, that was his name. He had backed into the room, rapped on the partition between the kitchenette and the beds to wake her, and now stood with a hand over his eyes, holding out a bundle of clothes.

"Hey, you uh, decent?" he asked.

"Yeah, you're good," Devi said after pulling the comforter up to her neck. Dean peeked through his fingers to be sure before dropping his hand and tossing the clothes on the bed.

"Mrs. Tran sends her compliments," he said by way of explanation, "Sam and me would be glad to lend you something, ya know, if we weren't..."

"Both a foot taller than me?" Devi offered.

"Dudes. I was gonna say dudes," he said, holding out a placating hand. Devi chuckled.

"I'm pretty sure I could wear one of Sam's shirts as a dress," she pointed out, "I'd just have to roll the sleeves up six or seven times."

"I'd like to see his face if you did," Dean grinned, "Hey, we picked up some Olive Garden. We're having a powwow next door, when you're ready." Devi nodded, and Dean exited to let her dress.

She had expected the clothes to be a loan, but found the tags were still on them; Mrs. Tran had apparently bought them specifically for her. Devi wondered if Kevin had anything to do with that. There were two sets of leggings and several shirts, including an embroidered tunic, as well as a pack of underwear and a new bra. She smiled as she noted that someone had carefully hidden the latter two items inside a shirt, wondering whose sensibilities were being protected. Slipping into the new clothes, Devi breathed a sigh of contentment, exceptionally relieved to have real apparel again. There were even a pair of canvas loafers that were only slightly too big for her.

She tapped on the connecting door to the Tran's room, and entered in response to Sam's "Come in!" The brothers and the Tran's sat across the table from each other, with Castiel on a chair at the end. As she approached, the angel rose and offered his seat.

"I can find another chair," Devi protested.

"I don't eat," he replied simply, moving to stand by the window, behind Dean.

As Devi sat down, Sam passed her a container. "I got you penne primavera," he said, "Is that okay?" Devi nodded vigorously, enthusiastically tucking into the colorful pasta. Sam smiled, "I wasn't sure whether you needed jhatka or halal or something, so I figured I'd err on the side of caution." Devi was impressed by his consideration.

"What's jhatka?" Dean asked, around a mouthful of spaghetti and meatballs.

"Hindu dietary law," Sam replied, "It means the animal was given a quick death."

"It's part of ahimsa," Devi explained. Dean raised an eyebrow, and she went on, "It means 'compassion' or 'non-violence.'"

"I thought Hindus had to be vegetarian," Kevin ventured.

"Lots of us are," Devi said, "Those who do eat meat tend to do so rarely. And almost no practicing Hindu will eat beef."

That gave Dean pause, "But you don't mind us eating it, right?" He seemed genuinely worried.

Devi couldn't resist. "Yes, I'm mortally offended by my rescuers consuming cow in front of me," she said flatly, schooling her expression. Dean's face fell, and Devi rushed to reassure him. "Kidding! Kidding, oh god, I'm sorry!" she laughed apologetically, "I guess I don't convey sarcasm very well."

"I'd say you convey it too well," Sam corrected, grinning.

"I can't use it at work," Devi admitted, "I've confused my coworkers too often." After a moment, she leaned over to Mrs. Tran. "Thank you for my clothes," she said, "How much do I owe you?"

"Not a thing," the woman answered briskly, "Kevin told me how you helped him when... during Crowley's questioning."

"I didn't think I was that much help," Devi said, surprised, "Besides, I figure I still owe him for..." She hesitated, seeing Kevin's subtle head shake. "For sending Castiel after me," she finished, shifting her attention to the angel, "before those demons hauled me off to who-knows-where." Castiel nodded in response, smiling slightly. Devi caught Kevin's eye, raising a confused eyebrow. Sam glanced back and forth between the two of them, but said nothing.

Dean leaned back, dusting off bread-stick crumbs off his hands, "Welp, Garth will be here in about fifteen. You guys packed?" he looked to the Trans. Mrs. Tran nodded, and started drilling Dean on the particulars of the safe house.

Devi took the opportunity to scoot her chair closer to Kevin. "Did you tell her what I was doing for Crowley?," she whispered, "That I was helping him find you?"

"I sort of skipped that part," Kevin admitted.

"You know 'that part' was kind of the whole thing, right?" Devi put to him.

"You weren't doing it 'cause you wanted to!" Kevin disputed, "Besides, you did try to warn me in the diner."

"Only once I couldn't hide in your head anymore," Devi pointed out.

"It doesn't matter," he pressed.

"It does, too!" she insisted.

"Uh, guys?" Sam's voice broke through their argument, and they both realized that their "whispers" had risen to a volume audible by everyone at the table. Blushing, they dropped the subject, Mrs. Tran looking at her son askance.

After Garth arrived, Devi edged next to Kevin, knowing she wouldn't get another chance. She wasn't sure what she needed to tell him or why, whether she was apologizing, explaining, or just trying to make sense of what had happened, but she couldn't leave things as they were. Leaving well-enough alone wasn't in her nature.

"Kevin, I, I'm sorry," she began, "When this whole thing started, I had no idea what I was doing, I just..." she shook her head, searching for words.

"You did what you could to survive," he finished for her. She swallowed, and looked away.

"It's not that simple," she went on, "I thought I was protecting my family, but I ended up pulling a lot of other people into the line of fire, including you and your mom." She looked back at him, "And for that I'm sorry."

Kevin nodded, "You're not the first one to make that mistake." Devi shot him a questioning look, and he shrugged, "A while back, when I first started being a Prophet, one of the bad guys had my mom," he turned towards her, "and I told them everything." He closed his eyes, "I didn't know what else to do."

Devi laid a hand on his shoulder, "There's nothing else you could do," she said softly, "she's your mom."

"Exactly," he said, looking at her earnestly, and she rolled her eyes.

"Okay, that's cheating," Devi replied, and he grinned. "Seriously though, I think, something about all this, my sight," she gestured vaguely, "maybe I did want to know more..." She crossed her arms, looking at the ground, "I wanted to see how far I could go." Shame rose in her chest, and she released it in a bitter laugh, "Boy, I guess Crowley really saw me coming."

"Hey, it's okay" Kevin touched her arm, "I mean, it's not like the SAT had a 'Defense Against the Dark Arts' section." She gave him a sad smile, and he continued, "None of us got thrown into this mess with a manual. We just have to make it up as we go."

"Thanks," Devi said softly, still hugging her chest, "So, what now?"

Kevin gave a wry chuckle, "Good question." He looked on as the Winchesters introduced Garth to Mrs. Tran, "I'm going to do my best to get the instructions for closing Hell from the tablet. We shut up the demons, this ends," he looked back at her, "for both of us." Devi nodded. The tough part would be lasting until then.

End  
file.